

God at Work

by Ray C. Stedman

We turn now to The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians, one of the greatest letters of the New Testament. We will study Chapters 1 through 3, thus completing the exposition of this book begun several years ago with Chapters 4 through 6 – messages which are already available in print (Catalog Numbers 98-116, 119-127, and 130-133).

I hope that, as we begin this doctrinal portion of Ephesians, your heart will be anticipating tremendous truth. I would like to urge you to read this letter through once a week during the time that we are engaged in studying these first three chapters. Read it through in various versions, and in different ways. Read it through at one sitting the first week, and then the next week take a chapter a day. Other weeks read it in some of the paraphrases. Let this truth come to you afresh in new and different language. I can guarantee that if you will do this faithfully until we finish our study you will never be the same person again. This truth has the power to change you, and it will!

I think that, of all Paul's letters, the letter to the Romans and this one to Ephesians have affected me most profoundly. Both are attempts at a systematic and rather exhaustive setting forth of the whole Christian view of life and of the world. Others of Paul's letters deal with specific problems, and they are very helpful when we are involved with those same problems. But these two deal with the whole sweep of truth, the great canvas of God's painting of reality.

Ephesians has changed my life again and again:

- It was from this book that I learned how the body of Christ functions. The truth of the fourth chapter was strongly in my heart when I came to Palo Alto, as a young man fresh from

seminary, and began to pastor a small group of people meeting here. It was the conviction that the ministry belongs to the saints, and that the business of a pastor is to help the people find their ministries and to prepare them to function in them, and to discover the excitement of living as Christians where they are, which was formative in the early years of Peninsula Bible Church and is still so strongly emphasized here.

- It was from this letter that I learned, as a young man, how to handle the sex drive which God had given me, as he has given it to all of us, and how to live properly in a sex-saturated society. This letter is most practical in that way. It teaches us how to come to grips with life as it is.
- This letter taught me profound truths about marriage and about family life. I'm still learning in this area, and have a lot more to learn, but I've already learned a great deal about this subject from the letter to the Ephesians.
- It was this letter which taught me better than any other passage of Scripture how to understand the strange turbulence I often found in my own heart, the spiritual attacks to which I was subject, and how to deal with my fears and anxieties and my depressions – where these were coming from, and what to do about them.

So this is a great and practical letter, and I urge you to become familiar with it and to make it second nature to know the truth of Ephesians.

Let me share with you the experience of another person in this respect. This is from the introduction to a book by Dr. John McKay, for many years the president of Princeton University:

I can never forget that the reading of this Pauline letter when I was a boy in my teens exercised a more decisive influence upon my thought and imagination than was ever wrought upon me before or since by the perusal of any piece of literature. The romance of the part played by Jesus Christ in making my personal salvation possible, and in mediating God's cosmic plan, so set my spirit aflame that I laid aside, in all ecstasy of delight, Dumas' *Count of Monte Cristo* which I happened to be reading at the time. That was my encounter with the Cosmic Christ. The Christ who was, and is, became the passion of my life. I have to admit without shame or reserve that as a result of that encounter I have been unable to think of my own life or the life of mankind or the life of the cosmos apart from Jesus Christ. He came to me and challenged me in the writings of St. Paul. I responded. The years that have followed have been but a footnote to that encounter.

So I would suggest that, if you feel the need for change in your own life and for deepening your relationship with our Lord, you would do well to expose yourself in a very personal way to these teachings from the letter to the Ephesians.

This letter was written about A.D. 61 from Rome during Paul's first imprisonment there. It was written to the Christians in the Roman province of Asia. These were ordinary people – tradesmen, craftsmen, a few doctors and lawyers, some politicians – the general run of people. Many of them were slaves. The letter is commonly called "The Epistle to the Ephesians," but, as a footnote in the Revised Standard Version points out, this is not found in many of the ancient manuscripts. Most have just a blank for the address of these saints. Many scholars, therefore, feel that this is a circular letter which was written to many churches, probably those in the region of Ephesus. Some think it may have been addressed to the very churches to which Jesus had John address the letters in the book of Revelation, beginning with

Ephesus and ending with Laodicea. It may be of interest to you to notice that, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul refers to a letter from Laodicea. Many feel that this is that letter. It was brought from Rome by the hand of Tychicus, to whom the apostle dictated this great treatise. Circulated from church to church, and read in each one, it finally ended up in Ephesus where it was labeled, *The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians*. At any rate, as we gather from Paul's footnote at the end, it is really a letter addressed to all Christians everywhere. You can read it, therefore, as "the letter of Paul the Apostle to the church at Palo Alto, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus."

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. {Eph 1:1-2 RSV}

That is the briefest salutation in any of Paul's letters. There are just three simple things to which I will call your attention in passing:

1. First, Paul's credentials: notice how he describes himself, "an apostle ... by the will of God." An apostle was one sent with a message, a messenger. Paul gloried in the fact that he was an apostle of Jesus Christ. And, as he tells us in his letter to the Galatians, the Lord Jesus appeared to him directly. Paul did not learn what he knew about the gospel by discussing it with the other apostles. Peter and James and John and others of the twelve were never teachers of the Apostle Paul. The truth which he imparts to us here he learned directly from Jesus Christ. And that is his authority. Therefore, when you read Paul you are reading an authorized spokesman for the Lord Jesus. He speaks by the authority of Christ. He makes this clear in all his letters.

I am sometimes amazed at the brazen temerity of people today who will read a section from one of his letters and say, "I don't agree with Paul." Well, that makes me tremble. Paul is speaking as an apostle. An apostle is an authorized spokesman. What he says is what he has heard. So, if you don't agree with Paul, you don't agree with the Lord either! We need to remember that as we come to this letter.

2. Paul was always amazed by the fact that it was “by the will of God” that he was an apostle. He had no other glory in his life than that God, in the amazing wonder of his grace, had called this man who was such a bitter, intense, nationalistic persecutor of the church, had arrested him and changed him, and had sent him out to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul could never get over that: “Called by the will of God” – what a mighty influence this was in his life! Now notice that he gives no other credentials. He doesn’t refer to his training at the feet of Gamaliel, nor his Hebrew background and pedigree, nor the brilliance of his intellect, nor any thing else. He simply says, “I’m an apostle by the will of God. That is the ground upon which I write.”
3. Then notice how these Christians are described: “saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus.” *Saints* is a word at which we all shudder a little. We don’t like to be called *saints* because we have such a plaster idea of what a saint is. We think of them as being unreal – so beatific, so holier-than-we, so unlike ordinary human beings. But the saints of the New Testament are not that way; they are people like us. Saints are people who are beset with struggles and difficulties, who have disturbances at home, and problems at work, and troubles everywhere else. They’re normal people, in other words!

But one thing is remarkable about them: They *are* different. That is really the basic meaning of this word *saint*. In the Greek it is a word derived from the word for *holy*. And *holy* means distinct, different, whole, belonging to God and, therefore, living differently. That is the mark of the saint. It isn’t that he doesn’t have problems, only that he approaches them differently. He handles them in a different way. He has a different lifestyle. That is what Paul is talking about here. Their characteristic is that they are faithful, which means, of course, that they can’t quit. That’s what a Christian is – a person who can’t quit being a Christian. A true Christian just can’t stop!

A young man called me this past week to tell me how discouraged he was, how he’d lost his confidence in prayer because he felt that no

answer was coming, and how ready he was to quit. So I said to him, “Well, why don’t you just quit, then? Give up. Stop being a Christian. Try it.” – because I knew that if he did, the first thing he would have discovered is that he couldn’t quit. And he knew it, too. The minute I said that, he acknowledged it: “You’re right. I can’t quit.” That is because, as Paul will describe in this letter, there is imparted to us the Holy Spirit of God, and we are sealed by the Holy Spirit so that we can’t quit! That is a mark of a believer in Christ.

Then comes **the invariable greeting of Paul** to these groups of believers: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The two great heritages of the Christian are grace and peace. These are two things you can always have, no matter what your circumstances. Grace is all God’s power, all his love, all his beauty available to you. It is a marvelous term which wraps up all that God is and offers to us. It comes from the same Greek word from which we get our English word charm. Grace is charming, lovely, pleasant. It is something which pleases, which imparts charm and loveliness to a life. Peace is freedom from anxiety, fear, and worry. These are the two characteristics which ought to mark Christians all the time:

- Grace – God at work in their life; and
- Peace – a sense of security, of trust.

A man said to me this morning, “You know, I’ve learned something new about trust. Trust is not knowing, and yet still being at peace, at rest.” You see, if you know something, you don’t have to trust. But trust is not knowing, and still being at peace.

From here the letter follows the usual structure of Paul’s letters. First comes the doctrine, the teaching, the great, revolutionary, radical facts that God is setting before us. And then comes the practice, the application, the working out of these in terms of the normal situations of life.

Now, don’t read these first three chapters of this letter as though they were mere theological gas. They are not! They are facts! They are what God says is real. They are what is actually happening in the world, and what is available to you. And if

you once read them that way you won't treat them as merely academic. You'll begin to found your life upon these facts and act upon them. That is why Paul always begins his letters by setting forth the radical facts of life as God teaches them.

Also characteristic of Paul is to gather everything up in one great prefatory statement, and then break it down into its detail. So I'm going to conclude this introductory message by examining the great statement which Paul makes at the beginning of this letter and which gathers up the great themes of Ephesians to which he will return again and again. And then we'll look briefly at these themes.

In Verse 3 we have a tremendous summary of the teachings of this letter:

Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places [or, more literally, "in the heavenlies"], {Eph 1:3-4 RSV}

There are four elements in this summary that I want you to note:

1. Paul begins, first, with **the One who is behind all these blessings**, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is his starting point. And when a man begins with God you know that what he is going to say is in line with reality. Our problem is we don't start our thinking with God; we tend to start it with ourselves, with our experience, which is only a partial view of truth. Thereby we immediately narrow the range of our vision to what we are going through and what is happening to us, and we don't see this in relationship to the whole reality of life around us. Consequently we get twisted and deformed ideas of what is happening. The only proper way to view truth is to see it in relationship to all truth everywhere. And there is only one way to do that, and that is to start with God. Only God is great enough to encompass all truth.

This is the difference between what the Bible calls "natural" thinking, as done by "the natural man," and the "spiritual" thinking of "the spiritual man." Natural thinking is always limited, always wrong to some degree, because it isn't large enough and broad enough to handle all the facts. But spiritual thinking is al-

ways God-centered, and, therefore, true, and to the extent that it is spiritual, it is true in every way. We need to learn to be spiritual thinkers about ourselves. This is where Paul begins.

2. The second element is **the aim of the work of God**. He sums it up in the twice-repeated word *blessed*: Blessed be God, and blessed are we with every spiritual blessing. That is what God is aiming to do. His goal is to bring about a world, a universe, filled with blessing.

Frequently throughout this letter you find the repeated phrase that everything occurs "to the praise of God's glory," i.e., in order that God should be praised, in order that his people should be so struck by the wonder of what has happened to them that their hearts reflect without limit and without their being able to prevent it – the praise and the glory and the blessing of God. Now, you know that is not new. We all have learned that God is to be praised. We are to give thanks in all circumstances, etc. But most of us think of that as something we must make ourselves do. We have to do this because God needs it, his ego needs to be massaged every now and then by our praise, and unless we praise him he won't operate. He gets upset and mad at us and doesn't run things right, and we have to butter him up a little bit to get him to work. That is really the basis upon which most of us act, at least much of the time, isn't it?

But that isn't what this is talking about at all! It is saying that God has done such remarkable deeds that, if we once understand them, if it once breaks upon our dull intellects what it is that God has already done for us, what is already true of us right now, there will be nothing that we can do but stand in absolute awe and amazement, and say, "You mean that is true of me, Lord? I am overwhelmed! My God, how great thou art!" That is what God is after. That is what he wants to produce – that sense of awe and amazement which causes us to stop and give thanks to a great and glorious God who has given us every spiritual blessing.

In the verses that follow, those blessings are listed for you. We are going to look at them in more detail in subsequent messages, but for now let me just gather them up for you.

- Notice that:

... he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. {Eph 1:4 RSV}

That is Number 1: It goes back before the beginning of time, before the foundation of the universe.

- The second:

He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. {Eph 1:5-6 RSV}

What a fantastic thing that is! We are members of the family of God, made to be partakers of the divine nature.

- Third:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavishes upon us. {Eph 1:7-8 RSV}

Think of that! Our guilt is removed, utterly gone.

- Four:

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. {Eph 1:9-10 RSV}

We have been taken into the secret councils of the Almighty. He has unfolded to us what he plans to do, what he is going to accomplish in the future. We have been told something of the details of this plan.

- Then look at Number 5:

In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. {Eph 1:11-12 RSV}

That is why we are gathered here this morning. God has appointed us to be a demonstration of all these great truths, to live for the praise of his glory.

- Look at the sixth:

In him you also, who have heard the word of truth [Think of that! In this election year when all the politicians are trying to confound and confuse us with words of promise there is a place where you can get the truth, the straight goods, the facts as they are], the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, {Eph 1:13a RSV}

All that, you see, comes as a part of the work of the word of truth.

- And then the last:

... were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. {Eph 1:13b-14 RSV}

Those are the things that make life worthwhile. Without these great facts, life is unbearable to man, desolate, dull, boring, and we can hardly stand ourselves or each other. This is a list, if you like, of the incompetencies of man. Man cannot provide these. No political party can introduce them. They come from God, and God alone – God at work. No one else can give them to us. It is absolutely impossible that we ever should achieve them by ourselves. They are the gifts of God.

3. The third element of this great verse is that the apostle points out that **all this blessing is “in Christ.”** All this comes to us in Christ, in the

Person and the work of the Lord Jesus himself. This fact is going to be stressed again and again in this letter. No two words appear in it more frequently than “in Christ,” or “in him.” Over and over it is emphasized that everything comes to us through him.

We must learn not to listen to those who claim to have God’s blessing in their lives, and yet to whose thinking Christ is not central. They are deceived, and they are deceiving us if we accept what they say. The only spiritual blessing that can ever come to you from God must always come in Christ. There is no other way that it can come. So if you are involved with some group which sets aside the Lord Jesus Christ and tries to go “directly to God,” and thus claim some of the great spiritual promises of the New Testament, you are involved in a group which is leading you into fakery and fraud. It is completely spurious! For God accomplishes spiritual blessing only in Christ. Physical blessings are available “to the just and the unjust alike,” but the inner spirit of man can be healed and cured only in Christ, and there is no other way.

4. Finally, notice the locale where all this occurs – **“in the heavenlies.”** Now, that doesn’t mean heaven, as we usually conceive it. Paul is talking here about the present experience of these blessings. We are involved with the “heavenlies” right now. These heavenlies, which occur throughout this letter and in other parts of Scripture, are really the realm of invisible reality, of things which are true about life in the world, in the cosmos, but which we can’t see or touch right now. And yet they are very real, and they play an important part in our lives now. This is what Paul refers to in Second Corinthians 4: “We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen;” {2 Cor 4:18 RSV} – unseen, invisible reality.

Do you remember the story in the Old Testament about Elisha and his servant? They were in a small city one day when they were surrounded by the armies of Syria. The servant looked out upon this vast enemy army and he saw the cavalry and the armed chariots. Fearfully he turned to Elisha and said, “Everything’s hopeless! Look! We’re sur-

rounded, what shall we do?” Elisha said, “Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And he prayed, “Lord, open his eyes,” {cf, 2 Ki 6:15-17}. And the Lord opened the young man’s eyes and he saw ringing the horizon all the fiery chariots of God, manned by hundreds and thousands of angels, and he realized the true situation.

We live in a world where most of the important things of our lives are not visible. They can’t be touched or seen or tasted or weighed or otherwise measured. They are not subject to the scrutiny of science, nor are they available to the philosophies of men, but they are there. We must recognize that fact. And it is in this realm that these great spiritual blessings are to be found. It is here that our life can be changed and we can become different people, by God’s grace. All this will be developed in fuller detail as we go on into the letter.

I want to close by returning to that great initial thought of the Apostle Paul and pointing out to you how he underlines the fact that it is God who does all this. This is not the activity of men that we are talking about. In this first chapter there is no demand for us to do anything. Later on, the question of human activity will come in, but not here. He is talking about what only God can do and what God alone has already done. All progress in the spiritual life comes by understanding a truth which is already true. It is not something that God is going to do, but something he has already done. Therefore it is available to you the minute you understand it and grasp it.

It would be useful for you to take a pencil and underline the finite verbs of this passage. You will notice that they all refer to God. He chose, ... he destined us, ... in him we have redemption, ... he has made known to us his will. Go through the passage and what you will see highlighted is God at work.

All around us in the world today men are doing things, and it is right and proper that they should. Men are to work and to plan, they are to dream and to hope, and they are to try to accomplish things. It is right for the government to try to govern and for statesmen to try to accomplish their goals. All of us have something to do. But what our age has tragically forgotten is that the only activity which

will change anyone ultimately is what God does, not what man does. That is where we need to focus our thoughts. And we need to see what it is that God is doing.

One of these days, we all recognize and know, even though we hate to admit it, all the vaunted, proud, symbols of our civilization as we know it today are going to be brought low, to crumble into dust, to be lost in the debris of the ages. All the knowledge on which we pride ourselves today will be lost in some forgotten tomb. Man's glory shall fade. All the accomplishments of our present day which give us such self-satisfaction will become nothing but obscure references in some future history, if anything at all. And what will endure in that day is the work of God. These great facts, revealed in this letter, will still be as brilliant and untarnished in their reality as they are today. Rudyard Kipling once wrote about the British Empire,

Far flung, our navies melt away, on dune and
headland sinks the fire.
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday is one with
Nineveh and Tyre.

America's greatness is going to fade, as is Russia's, and as is that of all the nations of the earth. But one day, when that day comes, the things which will be true are these great facts. Therefore, if we want to endure, if we want to lift our eyes above the plodding, puny circumstances of our own present experience to the greatness of what God is doing, we must give our attention to these great thoughts – planned before the foundation of the world, begun even before there was an earth, designed to reveal the greatness of God's grace, his compassion, his tenderhearted love, his forgiving ability, his power restore, available through the one Person who in all the scope of history is able to accomplish what no other man could do, Jesus Christ himself, and resulting at last in the healing of all division and the breaking down of every barrier.

That is what Ephesians is all about. It is a story of how God is breaking down division.

We are so aware of division, aren't we? We are divided within our homes, divided in our work, divided into cliques and camps and nations, all against one another, with all the consequent hurt and injury and malice and hate and prejudice. God

is at work to remedy that. He is healing it. He has already begun. He is breaking down the barriers, removing the hate and enmity, restoring and bringing together.

Remember what Jesus said: "All those who are with me gather, and all those who are against me scatter," {cf, Matt 12:30, Luke 11:23}. You can tell whose side you are on by the effect of your life. Are you gathering, or scattering? Are you healing, or hurting? Are you bringing together, or breaking up? Which is the direction of your life? Well, God's great movement in our lives, as individuals, and in history at large, is to heal and make whole, to bring together all things in Christ, to restore harmony once again in his universe.

The exciting thing about that, according to this letter to the Ephesians, is that it has begun already. It has begun in us. We are the first ones to set it forth. We, the church, have felt the force of this great movement of God. We have found it in our homes – the barriers are beginning to break down there, the divisions are beginning to be healed. The harmony is beginning to emerge in our church life. And the more visibly it is evident, the more the world will see God at work. That is what this letter is all about – how to allow this healing flow from the great God behind all things, through his Son Jesus Christ, to touch our individual lives and heal us of all our illness and injury. No wonder this great apostle cries out, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies."

Are you a part of this scheme?

Are you part of this family?

Have you joined the family of God through Jesus Christ our Lord?

If not, you can become a part of it right now. You can say, "Lord Jesus, here I am. I respond to your appeal. Enter my life and make me part of your family."

And if you are already part of it you can give thanks to God.

Prayer:

Once again, our Father, we pray that you will take away the dimness from our vision, the dullness from our understanding, and help us to comprehend these great themes which have changed the history of

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the world again and again as men have grasped them. Save us from the folly of taking them for granted or of giving them no attention. But help us, Lord, young and old alike, to think deeply and seriously about these great statements, to understand

that this is the way that you are acting, this is the course of your movement through history. Lord, help us by thy grace to rejoice, to lay hold of your provision, and to be responsive instruments in your hand; in Jesus' name we ask, Amen.

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