

Foothills Congregational Church
United church of Christ
461 Orange Ave., Los Altos, CA 94022

The Rev. Dr. Chris Breedlove
Sr. Minister
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Rock Bottom Blessings

Ephesians 1: 1-14

(verse by verse exegetical style sermon, my commentary notes and quotes are in []'s)

[Paul lived his whole life in the shadow of the Roman empire; he was imprisoned a few times-- perhaps several times. Ephesians is one of the prison letters attributed to Paul. While Paul may have not been the original author of Ephesians, many Pauline themes are nevertheless peppered throughout the letter to the Ephesians.]

[Just imagine Paul, or a person very much like him living in the shadow of empire, writing an inspiring and heartfelt letter to a belabored church in Ephesus. This author has hit the rock bottom in life, and yet he/she feels blessed, and centered in faith in Jesus. Also, one of the Pauline themes throughout Ephesians is the call for unity (between Gentiles and Hebrew Christians)-- we do well to note that *unity isn't uniformity*-- there can be diversity in our experience of unity.]

[Parenthetically, our other text for today (a rather harsh story about John the Baptist being beheaded by King Herod) might just be a cautionary take for would-be disciples, or it might be an escalation of drama in the Markan gospel narrative-- *How will Jesus react to such murderous silencing of John the Baptist?* The suspense build in the Gospel of Mark with the murder of John the Baptist]

1 **Paul**, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

[“The Greek name ‘Paul’ meant ‘**little**.’ There have been several theories about the origin of his name. 1. A nickname describing his physical height, the second century tradition that Paul was short, fat, bald, bowlegged, bushy eyebrowed and had protruding eyes is a possible physical description of Paul. This came from a second century non-canonical book from Thessalonica called *Paul and Thekla*. 2. Paul's personal spiritual evaluation, passages like 1 Cor. 15:9; **Eph. 3:8**; 1 Tim. 1:15, where he calls himself "**the least of the saints**" [probably because he persecuted the Church, Acts 9:1-2]...” (Bob Utley, Ephesians)

To the **saints** [only the plural form of “saint” is used in Paul’s writings] *who are in Ephesus* [modern day Turkey] *and are faithful** [faith as in: trust, loyal to, belief] in **Christ** [Gentile-Greek term for messiah, “the Anointed one”] **Jesus** [Hebrew term for messiah] :

2 **Grace** to you and **peace** from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[“This customary Pauline blessing amounts to a combination of the typical Hellenistic greeting, *chairein* (= “rejoice”), altered to *charis* (= “grace”), along with the typical Jewish greeting, *eirene* (= *shalom* = “peace”). Grace and peace were key words for the apostle. Grace is God’s unmerited favor and blessing directed toward humanity. Peace is both God’s activity bringing

wholeness and harmony to the world and the result of that activity..." (David B. Cape, Southwestern Journal of Theology VOL. 39 FALL 1996)

[We cannot have grace without peace, nor can we have peace without grace.]

3 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,

[**"heavenly places"** is a phrase only found in Ephesians; we are left mostly to speculation about the origin of the phrase in popular usage in the day of Paul. Perhaps Paul, whom was imprisoned at various times, was accustomed to a meditative (aramaic) practice of freeing his mind and spirit even as his physical body was incarcerated; to this point, I am reminded of a scene in the movie, The Shawshank Redemption:

There's this great scene in The Shawshank Redemption, where Andy (one of the central characters played by Tim Robbins) is a prisoner that barricades himself in the Warden's office and plays an album of one of Mozart's most popular operas 'The Marriage of Figaro over the Shawshank prison PA system-- This does not sit well with the prison authorities and Andy Dufresne is subsequently punished for his rebellion of sorts. After Andy's punishment, Red asks him what he was thinking when he pulled such a stunt:

Andy Dufresne: *That's the beauty of music. They can't get that from you... Haven't you ever felt that way about music?*

Red: *I played a mean harmonica as a younger man. Lost interest in it though. Didn't make much sense in here.*

Andy Dufresne: *Here's where it makes the most sense. You need it so you don't forget.*

Red: *Forget?*

Andy Dufresne: *Forget that... there are places in this world that aren't made out of stone. That there's something inside... that they can't get to, that they can't touch. That's yours.*

Red: *What're you talking about?*

Andy Dufresne: *Hope.*" (*The Shawshank Redemption, 1994*)

[Paul must've had a sense of hope and faith in God that even the circumstances of his beaten and imprisoned existence could not spoil, corrupt or destroy.]

[I think the use of **"heavenly places"** in Ephesians 1.3 is akin to the "thin places" in Celtic spirituality; that is, there are places and moments in life that have such clarity, peace, and a sense of transcendent beauty-- we call such places and moments **spiritual experiences**.]

[Why is it that we don't have more spiritual experiences in life? We struggle moving from the **conceptual world** of being in to the interior center of our spirit where liberty, transcendence, and unbound joy abide.]

[The **conceptual world** is the world of symbolism, projection, and interpretation; it's a place where we label and categorize people and places; it's a place of polemics, doctrine, constructs, and propositions; it's a place of metaphors and analogies... it's hard to see clearly and spiritually in conceptual thinking and being.]

[The **"spiritual blessings of the heavenly places"** (Eph 1.3) is the unraveling of the conceptual world.]

4 just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. 5 He destined us for **adoption** as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.*

["to adoption as sons"] “This is Paul's familial metaphor (cf. Rom. 8:15,23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5). It is one of several metaphors Paul uses to describe salvation with emphasis on security. It was difficult and expensive to adopt a child in the Roman legal system, but once it was done, it was very binding. A Roman father had the legal right to disinherit or even kill natural children, but not adopted children. This reflects the believer's security in Christ...” [Romans 8: 35- 39]“ (Bob Utley, Ephesians)]

*7 In him we have **redemption [liberation from captivity]** through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace 8 that he lavished on us.*

[Here is an example of a verse that is hardly palpable to our modern day sensitivity. This verse is often misconstrued with theologies of substitutionary atonement (a theological construct claiming that Jesus died to forgive our sins); but what if, perhaps, Paul is speaking of his longing for “redemption” via the exiting of this life (subject to empire bondage and oppression) to be present with God and free of all suffering and oppression?]

[I think early churches would've of related to such liberation notions (Paul speaking of redemption) since the early church was heavily persecuted by the Roman empire and principalities of that day; See Walter Wink’s theology about “powers” and the myth of redemptive violence.]

With all wisdom and insight 9 he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 11 In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, 12 so that **we** [the Hebrews], who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 13 In him **you [gentiles]** also, when you had heard the word of truth, the **gospel of your salvation**, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; 14 this* is the pledge of our inheritance towards **redemption** as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.*

[The letter of Ephesians is an appeal for unity. Throughout his apostleship, Paul was deeply concerned about unity between Gentile and Hebrew Christians-- so much so, that Paul was willing to be imprisoned for such egalitarian beliefs.]

[Paul was also deeply in love with God, he was grateful for the gracious experience of redemption in his life despite the bonds and chains of prison; he had a **“heavenly place”** he could escape to even as his physical body was imprisoned; he had an awakened spiritual core to his being that could not be confined or constrained. Paul knew that regardless of his physical circumstance (trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword), “...that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35-39)]

The constraints of politics that confine you, cannot separate you from the love of God Jesus.

The constraints of physical distress that confine you, cannot separate you from the love of God Jesus.

The constraints of emotional wreckage that confine you, cannot separate you from the love of God Jesus.

You are loved by God, adopted in Jesus, forever a part of God's family... this is what Paul wanted the Gentile Christians in Ephesus to know— and it's what I hope we sense too. Amen.