

much

**Title: “You Are Richer Than You Think”
(Ephesians: An Alternative Reading of Reality)**

Text: Ephesians 1:3-14

One of the deepest movements of the human heart is the longing to be rich. In the Broadway musical “Fiddler on the Roof”, which became a now classic film (winning three Academy Awards) the lead character Tevye, an orthodox Jew living in Tsarist Russia, is talking to God while finishing the day’s chores. “Dear God,” Tevye prays, “You made many, many poor people. I realize, of course, that it’s no shame to be poor. But it’s no great honor either! So, what would be so terrible if I had a small fortune?” Tevye then sings:

If I were a rich man,
Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum.
All day long I'd biddy biddy bum.
If I were a wealthy man.
I wouldn't have to work hard.
Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum.
If I were a biddy biddy rich,
Yidle-diddle-didle-didle man.

He goes on to sing of building a big tall house with dozens of rooms and long staircases; and of filling his farmyard with chickens and turkeys and geese and ducks; and of the joy his wife Golde would have, “with a proper double-chin”. And of “the sweetest thing of all”: having time “to sit in the synagogue and pray. And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall. And I’d discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day.”

Then Tevye concludes by praying: “Lord who made the lion and the lamb, You decreed I should be what I am. Would it spoil some vast eternal plan, if I were a wealthy man?”

The apostle Paul who knows what it means to live as a sojourner in a foreign land, says to Tevye ... and to (every) other human who wants to be wealthy: “Oh Tevye, I have good news for you. In Christ, in Messiah, we are rich men and women. Tevye, in Jesus Christ, in Messiah, the words of the Scotia Bank slogan announce the good news of the Gospel: “You’re richer than you think”. I know I am conflating periods of time and geographical locations. But I think it is what Paul says to Tevye and to us. In Jesus Christ “you are richer than you think”. Or, more faithful to what Paul opens up for us in his letter to the Ephesians, “You are much richer than you think”. In relationship with Jesus, “In Christ, in the heavenly places,” we discover that the “some vast eternal plan” is all about making us very rich.

Our text today...and next Sunday... is Ephesians 1:3-14. In the original, in Greek, it is one long sentence. One of the longest in the Bible. Paul will have other longer sentences in his letter but none is long as 1:3-14. 202 words! Opening up for us “the every spiritual blessing:” with which the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ has blessed us in Christ, in the heavenly places.
Ephesians 1:3-14 (NASB)

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. In him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation – having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory.”

One long sentence...one long compacted, compressed sentence. But not a rambling, run-on sentence you English majors and teachers urge us to avoid. Andrew T. Lincoln in his commentary on Ephesians observes that “each thought builds on the previous one, sometimes explaining, sometimes elaborating, sometimes supplementing, sometimes contributing something new, and sometimes picking up again what had already been said”. (p.13)

It is possible that the long sentence can be broken down into three parts. You likely saw and heard the thrice repeated phrase “to the praise of...”.

Verse 6 – “to the praise of the glory of His grace.”

Verse 12 – “to the praise of His glory.”

Verse 14 – “to the praise of His glory.”

This tells us by the way that, ultimately, everything God does for the world in Jesus Christ, leads to worship: since it all ultimately manifests who God is, God’s glory, it all ignites and releases worship.

Some see in this possible three-fold breakdown of the long sentence, a Trinitarian structure. (Father, Son and Holy Spirit.)

Verses 3-6 – up to the first “to the praise of...”, Paul speaks of God the Father as the source, or origin, of “every spiritual blessing”.

Verses 7-12 – up to the second “to the praise of...”, Paul speaks of God the Son as the agent and the sphere, or location, of the “every spiritual blessing”.

Verses 13-14 – up to the third “to the praise of...”, Paul speaks of God the Holy Spirit as the seal of the “every spiritual blessing” and as the One who makes it all happen in our lives.

But as attractive as it all is, I do not think it is that neat. For one thing, God the Father is involved in all three supposed sections; indeed, God the Father is the subject of nearly all the finite verbs in the long sentence. And for another, God the Son, Jesus Christ, is involved in all

three supposed sections. The phrase “in Christ” or some equivalent, is found in nearly every clause of the sentence.

Verse 3 - “every blessing in Christ”

Verse 4 – the Father chose us “in Him” (Christ)

Verse 5 – the Father adopted us “through Christ”

Verse 6 – the Father freely bestowed grace on us “in the Beloved”, in Christ

Verse 7 – in Him (Christ) we have redemption

Verse 7 – “through His blood” (Christ’s blood)

Verse 10 – the Father is “summing up” all things “in Christ”

Verse 11 – “in Him” (Christ) we have obtained an inheritance

Verse 12 – We who were first to “hope in Christ”

Verse 13 – We were sealed “in Him” (Christ)

So I do not think there is a nice, neat structure to the long sentence. The reason is, I think, that Paul is so caught up in the riches of the Gospel that he is writing, or dictating, a spontaneous outpouring of praise, a torrential outpouring of praise. He is so freshly captured by the Gospel that the words simply tumble out of his mouth and heart. Like what happened to Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, when he began to realize what God was doing in the birth of his son. He spontaneously broke out in song: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished salvation for His people...” (Luke 1:67-79). And like the Virgin Mary, how she began to realize what God was doing in the birth of her son. She spontaneously broke out in an outpouring of praise: “My soul, exalts the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...” (Luke 1:46-55).

But whereas both Zachariah and Mary focus on the blessing God was pouring out on Israel, Paul celebrates the blessings being poured out on the world. His vision goes beyond one nation to all the nations of the world, as he goes on to develop in the rest of his letter.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing.”

“Spiritual” blessing. Not simply as over against “material” blessing. But “spiritual” in the sense of made real by the Spirit. New Testament scholar Gordon Fee agrees that most of the time, when Paul uses the word “spiritual” he has in mind God the Spirit. Not all the time. Like in Ephesians 6:12 where he refers to “spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places”. Clearly a different “spirit” is in mind there! But in the long sentence that begins the letter, I think Dr. Fee is right. Paul is not simply juxtaposing “spiritual” blessings against “material”, as though God is not concerned about material blessings; Paul is referring to the blessings God the Holy Spirit makes real in our lives.

In Christ, in the heavenly places, we are richer than we think or feel. Much richer!

It’s just that the riches are not obvious to the unaided intellect or emotions. We need a new set of glasses to see the riches. We need an alternative reading of reality, a reading shaped by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul is in Rome, in prison. But in Rome, in prison, he is also in Christ in the heavenly places. And under arrest in Rome he is arrested by his true location – “in Christ” – and his true state of being – “in Christ” – richer than anyone around him would think. Much richer!

In his long sentence, Paul celebrates just some of the “every blessing” with which we are blessed in Christ in the heavenly places. He names seven:

chosen before the foundations of the world (4)

predestined to adoption (5)

redemption (7)

forgiveness (7)

insight into the mystery of history (9)

an expansive inheritance (11)

and sealed, with the Holy Spirit (13)

Each of the blessings worthy of a number of sermons!

Blessing Number 1, verse 4. “Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world”. “Just as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.” Paul begins by jumping into the deep end of the pool! Or, is that he begins by emerging from the deep end of the pool!

The verb translated “chose” is *ellexato*, which comes into our vocabulary as “election”. Paul will use the word again half-way through his letter in Chapter 4, verse 1: “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk worthy of the calling with which you have been called...”...elected;... “the calling with which you haven been chosen, elected.”

Why begin with this blessing? Why begin with being chosen, being elected, before the foundation of the world? Because for the apostle Paul this blessing expresses the wonder of the Gospel. “He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.” Paul’s salvation is not grounded in himself; Paul’s salvation – and all that salvation means – is grounded in the free sovereign, gracious choice of the Living God. It is what startled him in the encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul, then Saul, was engaged in a campaign to stomp out what he considered “blasphemy” and “nonsense” Christians were proclaiming about Jesus of Nazareth. He was engaged in a campaign – a terrorist campaign – to wipe the name of Jesus off the pages of history. But to his surprise, Jesus Messiah is alive ... and came to him and claimed Paul for his own. From that day on Paul lived out of the deep and liberating realization that his salvation is not grounded in anything he did or did not do. His salvation is grounded in God’s free, sovereign, gracious choice in Christ. God chose to love Paul and claim him for Himself. It is the wonder of the Gospel: “Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world”.

Now, I know that this blessing raises all kinds of questions! Questions that lead into issues with fancy words like “double predestination”, “reprobation”, infralapsarianism, superlapsarianism and eternal decree. Greater minds than mine have wrestled with the question over the centuries, and not yet resolved them all. People like Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas; people like John Calvin who is held in high esteem or despised depending on how he is read; people like Martin Luther and John Wesley and Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth who emphasized that we cannot understand “election” apart from Christ, suggests that Christ is both the one who

elects and the one who is elected, that Christ is both the God who elects and the human who is elected. There are many nuances and caveats to the blessing of being chosen in Christ that one can get a severe headache trying to think it all into some coherent doctrine.

So I find I have to focus on what is clear about the first blessing Paul celebrates.

For Paul, and the other Biblical authors who speak of it, God's election of us in Christ before the foundation of the world is good news. The truth of election causes Paul to bless God, to bow his knees and stretch out his hands, offering his whole self. Christ tells me that as I try to understand this blessing and go down an intellectual road that no longer stirs my soul to worship, something is off. A right understanding of divine election will engender an outpouring of praise.

We know that no one chooses God. No one, of their own will, chooses to know and love and follow the Living God. Paul says in his letter to the Romans, quotes the psalmist: "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God." (Romans 3:10-11, Psalm 14). Oh, we all seek...for something. For something to fill the emptiness of the human soul, for something to take away the existential ache. But no one, of their own volition seeks the True and Living God. So, unless God seeks, no one will find. Unless God chooses, no one will be saved. I like how New Testament scholar Harold Hoehner puts it: "The only natural destiny of us all is separation from God. It is the sheer grace of God that allows any person to have another destiny" (Ephesians, p.188). I know this raises all kinds of questions. But this we know; unless God chooses to win us everyone would remain lost. The old hymn says it so well: "I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me. It was not I who found, O Savior true; No, I was found of Thee."

What is also clear in Scripture is that God "choosing" does not necessarily imply God "rejecting". That may seem like a logical deduction. But Paul does not go down that road in the text. God chose Israel. But that choosing did not imply that God was rejecting other peoples, despising other nations. In fact, God chose Israel for the sake of other peoples, nations! To Abraham, God said: "Leave your country and your relatives...and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you...and so you shall be a blessing...And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3) God's choice of Abraham was unto the blessing of the whole world. When Jesus chose twelve disciples (Luke 6:13; John 13:18; 15:19) He was not thereby rejecting all the other people who were drawn to Him. He just chose twelve in whom He would uniquely work in order that they would bless others. When Paul says to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:27) that God chooses the foolish of the world and not the wise, God chooses the poor and not the rich, the intention is not to thereby reject the wise and rich, "but to show the world that one does not come to know God because of worldly status". (Hoehner, p.187) God's election has an outward, "other-directed" goal: chosen out of the world for the sake of the world.

Paul names "chosen before the foundation of the world" first because this is where our security lies. Our salvation is not grounded in ourselves. Our salvation is not grounded in anything we did or do, or in anything we did not do or do not do. It is not even grounded in God's foreknowledge of what we would do or not do, or what we will do or not do. Our salvation is grounded in God's free, sovereign, gracious choice in Christ to claim us for Himself. Blessed Be His name!

Now, what Paul emphasizes in his long sentence is the reason for election: “that we might be holy and blameless before Him” (1:4). “Holy”. Many people bristle at the word because we are not in and of ourselves, holy. But we need not bristle. “Holy” is what the Living God is. Three times the angelic choir repeats the word: “Holy, Holy, Holy” (Isaiah 6, Revelation 4) It is what God is. And it is what God made us to be. It is what we all deep down in our souls want to be even if we do not know the word.

Holy.
Pure.
Clean.
Clear.
Whole.

To be holy is to be whole. Like the whole God. Who does not want to be whole? The Holy One chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him. It is the “vast eternal plan” to use the words of Tevye. We are to be holy.

Note carefully. God does not choose us in Christ because we are holy and blameless. God does not choose us in Christ because we are trying to be holy and blameless. God does not choose us in Christ because God foresees that one day we might be holy and blameless. Being holy is not the ground of our salvation. It is the goal. From before the world we made, the plan has been for us to be made like the Holy God ... clean, clear, whole, full of light and beauty.

Steven Walschmidt, as actor in Calgary, does a sketch involving Jesus and the disciple Peter. Jesus had told Peter to cast his fishing net on the other side of his boat. When Peter does so he and his co-workers can hardly haul in the catch. Peter falls down at Jesus’ feet, and says, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” (Luke 5:8) The encounter with the Holy One made Peter feel his own unholiness. Steven has Peter say to Jesus: “Go away from me, for I will make you dirty.” To which Steven has Jesus say: “No Peter, you will not make me dirty; I will make you clean”.

“Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.”

We are richer than we think or feel! Much richer.

Blessing no. 2. Verse 5 – “In love He predestined us as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ to Himself”.

“Predestined.” Again, do not get hung up in all the questions the word raises. Hear Paul’s fundamental declaration. In Christ we have a destiny. We have been destined for adoption!

In the Roman world a wealthy man would want to pass on his riches to an heir. If he had no son of his own, or, if the relationship with his son or sons was broken in some way, he would select one of his trusted servants, and adopt him as an heir. Can you imagine how that servant would

feel? From rags to riches overnight! No longer “servant of Mr. Wealthy”; but “son of Mr. Wealthy”, “Heir of Mr. Wealthy’s wealth”.

“Predestined to adoption through Jesus Christ to Himself”!

Now, in this case God the Father has a Son; “the Beloved”, as Paul calls him (1:6). And God the Father is very pleased with His Son. So He does not need to go looking for someone else to be heir of His wealth. Out of sheer grace, the Father decides to make other sons and daughter and bring them into the deal with His beloved Son.

Theologian J.I. Packer, living here in Vancouver, argues in his classic book, Knowing God, that adoption is “the highest privilege that the gospel offers” (p.186). Packer especially emphasizes what is surprising for a Reformed theologian, that adoption is a higher privilege than justification. Justification is a primary blessing of the Gospel ... no two ways about it. For in justification God the Judge declares that sinner “...are not, and never will be, liable to the death their sins deserve, because Jesus Christ, their substitute and sacrifice, tasted death in their place on the cross” (p.187). Yet, says Packer, this is not the highest blessing. “Adoption is higher, because of the richer relationship with God that it involves” (187). Packer writes: “Justification is a forensic idea conceived in terms of law and viewing God as Judge. Adoption is a family idea, conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as Father. In adoption, God takes us into His family and fellowship, and establishes us as His children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is a greater”. (p.187-188)

There is so much involved in this blessing, that we can explore another time. For now rejoice with Paul in the fact that in adoption we enter into and participate in “the relationship at the centre of the universe”. Before the foundation of the world there was a relationship between a Father and a Son. The relationship so pulsates with life that it itself is a breathing a spirit, a person, the Holy Spirit. We were created to enter into and participate in the relationship! Jesus is the one natural Son, the one natural child of God. Our of love He brings us home with Him to the Father’s house! And by His Spirit enables us to know His Father so deeply that we too pray as He does, “Abba, Father”. “Predestined to adoption”.

“According to the kind intention of His will” (1:5), says Paul. More literally, “according to His good pleasure”. What pleases the Living God ... what gives God great pleasure ... is to bring human beings ... not yet fully holy human beings ... into the eternal relationship at the centre of the universe!

It will take the rest of our lives to live into this blessing!

We are richer than we think or feel! Much richer.

Blessing no. 3. vs. 7 - “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace”. Redemption. In Christ we have redemption.

It is not just another synonym for salvation. The word has a very particular meaning. Not referring to salvation in general, but to a particular kind of salvation. (so Leon Morris, The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, 11) As Leon Morris of Australia points out, whereas we hear the word “redemption” and begin to think in religious terms, people of Paul’s day hear it and immediately think in non-religious terms. The verb form of the word simply means to “loose” and was used of all kinds of loosening: loosening of clothing, loosening of tied up animals, and so on (Morris, 12). It was especially used of loosening human beings from captivity of one sort or another: loosening slaves, loosening prisoners from jail, loosening political hostages, loosening people from oppressive debt and oppressive governments. And doing so by some kind of payment. Releasing slaves and prisoners and hostages and debtors by someone paying the price of redemption.

“In Him we have redemption through His blood”.

Now, at first, naming this blessing may seem like a diversion from the flow of Paul’s long-sentence-out-burst of praise. Chosen to be holy before God. Adopted to be children. And then redemption. This initially feels like Paul has just randomly jumped to another blessing. But when you think it out more this is not the case at all.

“We have redemption” points to the human condition apart from the grace of God. “We have redemption” points to the fact we all know but seldom really face: Apart from grace, we are in bondage. Apart from grace, we are held captive. And unless we are loosened, released from the bondage, we cannot enter into and enjoy adoption and election. In order to actively live in the riches of adoption and election, we have to be set free.

This too is one of the deepest movements of the human heart, the longing to be free. As we see played out before our eyes right now in Tunisia and Egypt. Human beings long to be free. What Paul wants us to realize is that the bondage is much worse than bondage to dictators and corruption and injustice. We are held captive by much stronger forces and powers: by sin, by evil, by darkness, by death. What we need is redemption from this deeper captivity.

What Paul is celebrating in his long sentence is that in Christ we have just the redemption we need. “Through His blood”. Through the shed blood of Jesus Christ we have been redeemed. How it all works is beyond our scope today. What Paul is celebrating is that when Jesus Christ shed His blood on that Roman cross, we were redeemed! From all that has held humanity captive. By His blood He has released us from the curse of the law, from the compulsion of sin, from the lordship of unseen powers in the heavenly places, from lies that have ensnared the human mind and heart, from the finality of death, and, therefore, from the fear of death. “The Son of Man”, says Jesus ... “Son of Man” is His favorite self-designation, “The Son of Man has come not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) He came to pay the price that sets captives free! “In Him we have redemption”.

And now we belong to Him. In Paul’s day what people redeemed they then owned. What Jesus redeems by his blood He now owns. He sets us free from all that holds humanity in bondage, so that we might belong to Him and live in the freedom of the children of God. (Romans 8:15, 21; Galatians 5:1, 13)

Enough for today. We will pick it up at this point next Sunday around the Lord's Table.

We are richer than we think or feel! Much richer.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ”. Chosen before the foundation of the world. Destined to adoption. Redeemed. And a whole lot more!