

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, July 24, 2016
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Philippians 2:1-11
Letters to the churches – Philippians

Ephesus. In New Testament times, it was a major city in the Roman province of Asia Minor, basically what we now know as Turkey. Ephesus stood on the Mediterranean Sea, at the mouth of the Kayster river. Since that time, the river has silted up and the site of the city is now several kilometres inland from the sea.

But in New Testament time, Ephesus was a main commercial center on the Mediterranean Sea, with a population estimated between 35,000 and 55,000. It was a major city, and the site of one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Temple of Artemis, dedicated to Diana, the Greek goddess of the hunt, and possibly the largest building in the ancient world. It is an ancient city, stretching back to its first settlement, 1,000 years before New Testament times.

All of these factors made Ephesus a highly strategic spot for Paul as he set about his task of bringing the Gospel to the Gentile – that is to say, the non-Jewish – world. Ephesus was significant as a place where the Greek and the Roman worlds intersected. It was a centre of trade and commerce, with people from all over the known world passing through, either doing business there or on their way to do business elsewhere. Paul's first visit to Ephesus is recorded in Acts 18, and Acts 19:10 says that he spent two years there, working with the congregation he had established and organizing missionary activity in the surrounding towns and countryside.

Ephesians. Paul's letter to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus Ephesians 1:1. Or as many 19th and 20th century scholars believe, the letter traditionally attributed as being from Paul. Students of the structure of the language, as well as the language itself and the theology of the letter, argue that it may have been written by a disciple of Paul's. He wrote to expound and summarize Paul's thinking, and in the custom of the day, used Paul's name for authority and credibility. I am not sure it makes a great deal of difference who wrote it, because the message remains the same either way.

Ephesians contains the usual greeting, maybe a bit briefer than some others, in 1:1,2; a listing of the blessings that the gospel of Jesus Christ brings upon the believer, in 1:3–2:10; a description of the change in the spiritual position of Gentiles as a result of the work of Christ, in 2:11–3:21; a plea for unity amongst the believers, despite the variety of gifts they had, in 4:1–16. And most of the rest of the letter is a list of instructions about how the believers were to live life in different relationships. This last section includes the words that get Paul such a bad name in certain circles, about wives being subject to (their) husbands as to the Lord in 5:21. I don't have time to get into that matter today, but I will point out that Paul only says that in the context of talking about the believers being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ in 5:20. And he also instructs husbands to love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her Ephesians 5:25. I ask you: to whom does he give the heavier task???

In the original Greek, the passage I chose as our text for today is one long, complex sentence of 203 words. In the English of the New Revised Standard Version, it is broken up into six sentences, but runs to 256 words. Whichever language you choose to study it in, it is a rich, dense passage to ponder.

And whichever language you choose to study it in – I suggest we stick to English – the passage is intended to shore up and strengthen the church of Jesus Christ to continue to be faithful in Christ's service. It reminds us time and again of who we are and whose we are, and in so doing, brings us back to the joy of living as God's beloved people. Because, says Paul, it is all real and very personal for the believer. In 12 verses, the words we, us, you and our appear 16 times. This is not something remote and academic and theoretical that Paul is talking about. Rather it is something real and present and immediate in the lives of followers of Jesus Christ.

'I am talking about you,' is the underlying message to the Ephesians, and through them to us. You are the ones who have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, who have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, who have been destined for adoption as children, who have had grace freely bestowed on you, who have redemption through his blood and the forgiveness of your trespasses.

You are the ones who have had grace lavished on you, who have obtained an inheritance, who have been destined according to the purpose of God who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that you might live for the praise of his glory. You are the ones who have heard the word of truth, and who have been marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.

So excited is Paul about this that he explodes into a song of praise, a doxology, right at the outset, and concludes the sentence with another burst of praise: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory Ephesians 1:3,14.

So, what does that have to do with us in our daily living for Christ today? Maybe this.

Feeling overwhelmed by life? 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 ...

Feeling lost and lone in the world? He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will ...

Feeling overwhelmed by failure and inadequacy? In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us....

Feeling that the woes and troubles and violence of the world, the depressing news that comes at us from all sides, are simply too much to put up with? In Christ you 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 ...

Feeling that you don't matter in the great scheme of things? This is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Read on a few verses past this passage, and you will find these words of confidence and assurance and power: I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power Ephesians 1:17-19.