

Blessed Trinity

Ephesians 1.3

It has been well said that if you try to explain the Trinity you will lose your mind, but if you deny the Trinity you will lose your soul. The Bible reveals to us that there is only one God, and that this God exists eternally in three distinct Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Some have called this a paradox. Some, more reverently, have called it a mystery. But whatever you call it, it is what God has revealed about Himself so that we may know Him truly and worship Him rightly. Paul develops the doctrine of the Trinity in this verse around the blessedness or praiseworthiness of each person of the Godhead revealed in God's gracious blessing of us.

Verses 3-14 fall into three discernable divisions. Each division focuses on one of the three Persons of the Godhead. Verses 3-6 focus on God the Father. Verses 7-12 focus on Christ. Verses 13-14 focus on the Holy Spirit. Each of these sections is punctuated by the phrase "to the praise of glory."

In addition to the Trinitarian structure of these verses, there is also a salvation historical movement. The Spiritual blessings that move us to bless God are recorded here from eternity past, through salvation history, into eternity future. First, in verses 4 and 5 we see the blessing of election in eternity past, "before the foundation of the world." Then, in verse 7 we see the redemption God wrought for us in time through the death of Jesus Christ. Then, in 8-10 we have the revelation of the mystery of the gospel, or the mystery of Christ, to the Apostles and through them to all of God's people. Then in verses 11-12 we see the salvation of the first converts, including Paul, and finally, in verses 13-14 the salvation of the Gentiles, including the Ephesians. As Paul exuberantly traces this glorious salvation history, he constantly reminds us that this is "to the praise of His glory."

So the Trinitarian structure of verses 3-14 and the unfolding salvation history in these verses, helps us to see the Trinitarian and redemptive themes in the opening salvo in verse 3. Greek grammarians tell us that verses 3-14 make one long sentence in the original. This heaping up of phrases is common in contexts of prayer and praise. So here, at the opening of this glorious display of the gospel that we call "Ephesians," Paul bursts out in praise of the praiseworthy God. Let us also consider the blessedness or praiseworthiness of our Triune God, so that we will be stirred with Paul to ascribe to Him all glory, and give Him all praise. After all, that *is* why He made us and redeemed us.

We see the blessedness of God the Father as the source from whom all blessings flow to us. God the Father is the fount of every blessing. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son" (Jn 3.16). Jesus is the One who was "sent from the Father." Paul calls Him, "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." If we have a poor understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, we may stumble over the truth that God the Father is "God of our Lord Jesus Christ." We tend to think that because Jesus is God, then He Himself has no God. Now granted, there is a mystery here that I am not competent to solve. Yet Jesus Himself said to Mary Magdalene in John 20.17, "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God." So Jesus and Paul are perfectly comfortable with this understanding of the Father as "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ." Perhaps, Paul underscores this at this point so that we will appreciate that it was the Father's will to save a people for Himself—that when He chose us before the foundation of the world, He, the Father, initiated the Covenant of Redemption with the Son, in which Covenant the Father chose a people, and the Son agreed to save those chosen people, and the Father promised to then give those chosen people to the Son as the reward of His obedience. This emphasis on the authority of the Father as the "God of our Lord Jesus Christ" shows us that grace was not wrenched unwillingly from the hand of God by His Son, but was freely, willingly, given out of His abounding grace.

Paul also calls God “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This language is quite familiar to us, as Jesus is often referred to not only as God, but also as the Son of God. And Jesus often addressed God as His Father. Jesus is, of course, the unique Son of God who is of the same essence with the Father, so that the Beloved Disciple, John, can open his Gospel with these words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The context makes clear that the “Word” in John 1.1 is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, even as God, Jesus is still the eternal Son. And God the Father is the eternal Father. God did not become a Father at some point in time, for there was never a time when the Son did not exist. God the Father is a Father by nature. When the Bible calls God “Father,” this is not just an analogy, like “He is a rock” or “He is a strong tower.” God is not describing Himself as Father based on human analogy. In fact, Paul says, in the correct translation of Ephesians 3.15 that “every fatherhood in heaven and on earth” is named from God the Father. He is eternally Father because God the Son is eternally the Son.

Now while it may seem quite fitting to refer to God as the “Father of Jesus Christ.” It is a distinction of grace that He is called “our Father” in the opening of this letter. As God blesses us with every true blessing, He does so as our Father. One of the blessings we find in this outpouring of praise is the blessing of adoption as sons through Jesus Christ. We were estranged from God because of our sinful rebellion. We in Adam and along with Adam said to God, “I don’t need you. I can run life my own way.” In our sin, we effectively disowned our Maker. But “in love He predestined us for adoption!” “He knew me, yet He loved Me!” Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who adopted us so that we to can call Him “our Father,” “my Father.” Jesus can address us, as He did Mary, “My Father and your Father.” Hallelujah! All praise to God!

Secondly, we see the blessedness of Jesus Christ as the sphere in whom all blessings come to us. Paul uses that prepositional phrase again that we saw in the salutation last week: “in Christ.” The Father has blessed us “in Christ.” There has been much written on our union with Christ. Modernists, who like to downplay the involvement of the supernatural in our lives, suggested that “in Christ” merely pointed to a moral or ethical union with Christ. In other words, we are united to Him by sharing a common goal for our lives that seeks to uphold the good and eschew the bad. This union could be worked out, according to them, by involvement in social improvements of one kind or another. One of their own, however, demonstrated that this view reflected more the modernists’ philosophy than the understanding of Paul, the Apostle. Spiritualists have sought to explain Paul’s language in terms of mystical union. While some have used this language of “mystical union” in a way that did not do damage to the biblical distinction between creature and Creator, this view too easily leads to the depersonalization of both God and man. The result of the mystic’s scheme is that when the two become one, there is essentially an unconsciousness of existence, rather than the biblical understanding of union which leads to indescribable joy.

The best way to understand the phrase “in Christ” and our union with Christ is by seeing how Paul employs this concept elsewhere. I will mention only two for the sake of time. First, Paul compares our being “in Christ” to our being “in Adam” in 1 Corinthians 15.22: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” Union with Christ is understood in terms of, and in contrast to, our union with Adam. So, what is humanity’s relation to Adam? Adam was our covenant head. Our relationship with God was determined by the one who represented us before God. Adam sinned, and so brought sin and its consequences down upon all of us, because we were all in Adam as our covenant head. Theologians refer to this as Adam’s “federal headship.” In similar fashion, but with opposite results, we who are in Christ are united to Christ as our covenant head. Our relationship with God is determined by the One who represents us before God. Therefore, because God is “the Father of **our** Lord Jesus Christ,” God is also “God **our** Father.” You can see the covenant headship played out in this federal, representative sense in Romans 5.12-21 as well.

The second example is found in Ephesians 5.22-33, where the one-flesh union of husband and wife is said to be first and foremost about Christ and the church. When we understand God's view of marriage, then we are better able to understand the union of Christ and His people, since marriage is patterned after the union of Christ and the church. According to the Bible, in this one-flesh union, the man is the head of the wife (1 Cor 11.3). The couple is envisioned as one body, with the husband as the head. So, it is no surprise to hear that Christ is the head of the church, which is His body. Since marriage is also a covenantal union, we have the same type of union being expressed in Ephesians 5 as we saw in 1 Corinthians 15, only explained with different applications. This marriage covenant union assures us of Christ's spiritual provision and protection since, "husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church because we are members of His body" (Eph 5.28-30).

So it is no wonder that Paul can say here, at the beginning of the word of praise to God that every blessing comes to us "in Christ." What a wonderful Savior we have, who "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, so 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!!" Christ died for us so that He might exult in us! Hallelujah!! What a Savior!!

Finally, we see the blessedness of the Holy Spirit as the seal by whom all blessings accrue to us. It is unfortunate that the ESV, along with most English translations, translates "spiritual blessing" with a lower case "s." All who have read these verses in the context of this extended blessing recognize that Paul does not mean "spiritual" as opposed to "material", but "Spiritual" as opposed to natural. In other words, the Holy Spirit as opposed to the not-so-blessed blessings that men can afford. These blessings are brought to us and sealed to us by the Holy Spirit. As I mentioned earlier, verses 3-14 are divided into three sections: 3-6 God the Father; 7-12 Jesus Christ the Son; 13-14 the Holy Spirit. Take a brief look at 13-14 to get an idea of what Paul means when He says "Spiritual blessings." There he says believers are "sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory."

Now in one sense, we already have these blessings. Paul says here in verse 3 "who *has* blessed us"—past tense. But in verse 14 we read "until we acquire possession." This is a clue to understanding our experience of salvation now and our expectation of salvation in the future. New Testament theologians have spoken of Paul's view of salvation as inaugurated eschatology. We are already saved, but we do not yet possess all that is entailed in salvation. God declares us righteous in Christ already, but our lives are not yet perfectly conformed to His righteous standard. God calls us saints or holy ones already, but we are not yet completely sanctified. We already have the Holy Spirit as a seal and guarantee of our inheritance, but we do not yet possess the fullness of that inheritance. So there is an "already" to our blessing in Christ, but there is also a "not yet" to our blessing in Christ. We are already blessed, but not yet in fullness. These blessings are the blessings of the age to come. Now, Paul describes the age to come as the fulfillment of a plan to "unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1.10). We live in the inauguration of the kingdom of Christ. In the consummation of the kingdom of Christ heaven and earth will be united in a New Heavens and a New Earth, so that God's dwelling will be with man in the fullest sense possible.

Amazingly, Paul says in verse 3 that the blessings that we experience now are "in the heavenly places." We will find that Paul uses the term heaven in a variety of ways—the heavens where the birds fly, the heavens where the sun, moon, and stars are, the spiritual realities that inhabit this creation, and the dwelling place of God with His perfected people. It is this last sense, God's dwelling place with His perfected people, to which Paul looks forward when he speaks of heaven and earth being united in the consummation. I believe this is also what Paul has in mind when he speaks of "every Spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." These blessings

that are future in a New Creation, are experienced now in Christ. There is a “not yet” to this blessing. But there is also a true “already.” For the presence of the Holy Spirit, who was promised as the end time blessing in the Old Testament prophets, has brought these future blessings into our present by our union with Christ. We do not have the full experience of these blessings, but we have a true first installment or down payment by the sealing of the Holy Spirit. Because of the gift of the Holy Spirit, Paul can say in 2.6 that God has “seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ.” Isn’t this just astounding! We are already seated with Christ in heavenly places. According to Paul, it’s not so much that the Holy Spirit brings heaven to us on earth, but that the Holy Spirit brings us to heaven. It’s not so much that the Holy Spirit brings the future into our present, but that the Spirit has brought us to the future. He is the *promised* Holy Spirit—the term “promised” pointing to the future. Yet He has sealed us in the present.

What God has predestined for us according to His will, and Christ has purchased for us by His blood, the Holy Spirit guarantees to us by His indwelling presence, so that, even now, the abundant life of the age to come has already become ours. The peace that God has promised is already here for us. The freedom from the bondage of sin has already been declared. The fellowship with God as our Father is ours to enjoy now in Christ. We don’t experience these blessings in their consummation yet, but the kingdom has been inaugurated, and the blessings already accrue to us and are guaranteed to us by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said, “Apart from Me you can do nothing.” But “in Christ” you have every Spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. So are you living apart from Christ, or in Christ? Are you abiding in Christ? Or are you trying to please God in your own strength? If you are frustrated with your progress in the Christian life, perhaps you are not appropriating the blessings that God the Father has predestined for you, that Jesus Christ has bought for you, and that the Holy Spirit has brought to you.

Later in this letter, Paul will apply these gospel truths to some common relationships. Children, are you struggling to obey your parents? The only way to do this, according to Paul, is “in the Lord.” In other words, you need Jesus to help you honor your father and mother. Fathers, are you provoking your children with inconsistent discipline and standards because your life is more governed by personal convenience than by the gospel of Christ? Husbands, how are you going to love your wife as Christ loved the church? Wives, how are you going to submit to your husband as the church submits to Christ? In Christ, by the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Father is blessing you to work out His purpose in you to maximize the display of His glory in your life and in your relationships. Later, we will look at the implications of the gospel for our various relationships. For now, let’s consider the focus Paul has here. Are you worshipping? Are you praising? Are you blessing God? Look to the Father as the source of every blessing. Look to Jesus as the sphere in whom you experience every blessing. Look to the Holy Spirit as the seal of every blessing. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

If you are not in Christ, then you are a stranger and an alien from all of these blessings.