

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 22, 2007**

PRAISE FOR THE BLESSING OF GOD (PART II)

Ephesians 1:7-10

Diamonds are one of the most valuable substances in the world and the hardest known mineral. They are formed from molten rock brought to the surface from volcanic explosions deep inside the earth, where the high pressure and temperature enable the formation of crystals, encased in a stone matrix we call a “diamond in the rough.” The crystal must go through a process of cleaning, sawing, cutting, and polishing in order to become a gemstone. This removes the worthless sediments and brings out the fire and brilliance of the stone. Experts eliminate the imperfections, cracks, flaws, and cloudiness of the rough diamonds and produce beautiful gems of the greatest possible size and highest value.

In much the same way, people who acknowledge their sin and confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, are diamonds in the rough. In Christ, God has made us into priceless stones, even though we struggle in our fallen and sinful existence. We are precious diamonds and He cuts and polishes us to make us more like Jesus Christ.

But, to be honest, I don't always feel like a diamond. I don't often feel like what I'm doing is acceptable to God. When I remember my mistakes and goof-ups or think about the way I react to difficulties and problems, I don't feel like the living stone God has made me to be.

Do you feel the same way? We often fail to see ourselves as God sees us. Instead, our self image is shaped by the lens of our circumstances, the way things are going in our lives, or how other people think about us. We get discouraged and forget about who we are in Christ – the great spiritual blessings that we have from God. We need to discover what God has done for us.

This morning, we will seek God's truth as we continue our study of Ephesians 1:3-14. Last week, we saw that this passage is about praise to God. The apostle Paul gives us a model prayer to thank God for the spiritual blessings we have from the Lord. It is a prayer designed to put our circumstances and difficulties in perspective. A prayer to reshape the way we think about ourselves and how we think about God.

Difficulties in relationships (past and present), business or school troubles, medical problems, family strife – these things often bother us and shape the way we understand life. Hopefully, they drive us to God in prayer. But it is our temptation to think that those things are bigger than God – even though we would never say that out loud. We know that sometimes we feel far from God. Perhaps our circumstances are overwhelming us. Perhaps we feel hypocritical. We ourselves have been sinful, we ourselves have wounded others, and we feel unfit to come into the presence of God. When we worship or pray, it doesn't feel right, as if our hearts are out of sync.

In comes Paul, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, with this long kaleidoscope of unrestrained praise. He puts our self image and perceptions right next to this infinite, incomprehensible God and shows us how God is bigger than the stuff in our lives. Why? So that we will believe that God can hear and answer our prayers and trust Him, even while we are diamonds in the rough. These words are given to you and me so that we'll pray these words, and pray these words until they become the words of our hearts back to God.

Last week we learned that our spiritual blessings are given to us by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Father chooses those who believe, the Son redeems us, and the Holy Spirit seals us for our inheritance. This morning, we'll focus on the Son's work of redemption in verses 7-10. In a few weeks, on August 19, we'll conclude this series by considering the blessings from the Holy Spirit in verses 11-14.

REDEMPTION ACCOMPLISHED THROUGH CHRIST'S DEATH

Let's look at our passage. Verse 7 tells us, *In him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.* Paul tells us that in Him, that is in Jesus Christ, we have something great. Redemption, the forgiveness of sins. We sang "Grace that is greater than all our sin..." just a few moments ago. We were singing about redemption, perhaps one of the most beloved terms in a Christian's vocabulary. Let's spend a few minutes understanding what redemption means.

I am indebted to the late James Montgomery Boice for his explanation of the word *redemption* in the New Testament. Understanding how Boice explained redemption will help us see clearly what Paul was getting at in Ephesians 1. What follows is drawn from his commentary.

Redemption is a word that comes from the activity we see in the marketplace. Literally, it means "to buy, to pay a price for something." It is a biblical idea that was common in the Old Testament. When a Jewish person lost his property through death, debt, or some other means, there was a provision that allowed him to get it back again through the obligations of a close relative called the "kinsman-redeemer." Whenever possible, this relative was to purchase the lost property and restore it to the family. In the Old Testament book of Ruth, Boaz was a kinsman-redeemer who redeemed the land belonging to Ruth's husband.

Redemption was also a concept used to settle potential lawsuits among God's people. If a farm animal killed or hurt a person, the animal could be killed in payment for the life taken. However, the owner of the animal could redeem the animal by paying a ransom payment to the person who was hurt or his relatives. The ransom, the redemption paid the price for deliverance.

In ancient Roman cities like Ephesus, redemption involved purchasing people as slaves. I'll pause to say that while the Bible does not condone slavery, the practice was commonplace in ancient culture so the Bible often speaks of it. When a person was sold, he was bought out of the marketplace, often with the thought that once purchased, he might never be sold again. Sometimes, a person would purchase a slave to work in his or her household. Other times, a slave might be bought in order to obtain his freedom.

That is the idea in Ephesians 1. We were bought out of slavery into freedom. In our 21st-century culture, talking about slavery might seem strange. But it shouldn't be. The Bible clearly speaks of our bondage, our slavery to sin. We are captured by our sinful disposition and cannot do anything to keep from sinning. Sure, we try to do better, we have good intentions. But we fall short. We're not consistent in our obedience. We're slaves!

Paul wrote to the Romans, in chapter 6, verse 16: "Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?" Friends, we are controlled either by the Spirit of God or by our own sin. Either we have Christ or we are slaves to sin.

If this is unfamiliar to you, ask yourselves why you do or say or think something that you are ashamed of. Why do you treat others in ways you regret or respond to circumstances with anger or despair or frustration? We all do. The Bible calls this sin.

Often, the Bible defines sin as *missing the mark*, like an arrow missing the bulls-eye of a target. You and I miss the mark. Our obedience has not measured up to the standards of God's holiness. We have not fulfilled the purposes for which God has made us, which is to glorify and worship Him. In Ephesians 1, Paul has a stronger idea in mind. He uses a word that is translated *trespasses* in other English Bibles (such as the New American Standard or English Standard Versions). We have received forgiveness of our trespasses.

Many of you, when repeating the Lord's Prayer will say the word *trespasses* when asking for forgiveness. Someone said that we Presbyterians say *debts* because we're always thinking about money! But the word *trespasses* indicates deviation from the path, crossing the boundaries of God's commands either by doing something that He tells us not to do, or by not doing something that He tells us to do. A trespass of God's commands. Whatever else we want or need in the Christian life, we need forgiveness of our sins, our trespasses.

Some will teach that Jesus came to earth simply to be a good example, to show us how to love people and live without hatred or prejudice. That is true. He is the example par excellence. He is the only one who loved and lived the right way. But His primary purpose was to die for us. The Bible tells us that "the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many!"

This redemption is what another preacher has called "God's costly grace." Paul draws our attention to the fact that our Father has redeemed us by the lifeblood of His Son. God the Father, who chose us before the creation of the world, decided before the creation of the world to send God the Son to die in our place. Think about that for a moment. The Son, who existed from all eternity gave His life for us. That is the highest possible price that can be paid.

In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, all of us are told: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."

1 Peter 1:18-19: “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”

Friends, you are the church bought by the blood of Jesus Christ. No higher price could have been paid for your redemption. Nothing else could declare how valuable you are more than that. Jesus bought us out of slavery to sin at the cost of His life.

In Jesus Christ, God redeemed you from slavery, out of the bondage of sin. He brought you into a marvelous freedom, from death to life, out of darkness and into His marvelous light. He is the one who has paid the highest price. In Him, the beloved Son of God, the Father’s only begotten, the Son who was loved more than any other. Don’t doubt the greatness, the magnitude, the generosity, as verse 8 says, the lavishness of God’s love for you. It is in Jesus Christ that you have your redemption. It is the cost to the Father of the Son which has given you and me freedom

REDEMPTION SUMMED UP IN CHRIST

Look at verses 9-10, *And He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.* Isn’t that grand? God accomplished what He wanted to accomplish. Everything together under Christ.

Please don’t get misled by the word “mystery.” Paul means that God’s will is fully revealed in Christ. He explains that later, in Ephesians 3: the mystery of Christ which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” Do you see? You and I have the benefit of redemption in Jesus Christ!

Some people try to make this verse into a doctrine of universalism, that forgiveness was for everybody, even if they don’t put faith in Jesus before they die. That’s the teaching on this verse by popular preachers like Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church. The problem is that the idea promotes the love of God at the expense of His holiness and justice. If everyone were saved, there would be no reason for the Cross, and the high cost of our redemption would be diminished.

Please don’t get me wrong. The gospel is freely offered to everyone. Anyone who calls upon the Lord in faith, believing that Christ died for their sins, will be saved – everyone, without exception. If you have not confessed your sins to God and trusted in Christ who died so that you can be forgiven, **I urge you to talk to me or someone else today and be sure.**

But, as we were reminded last week from verse 4, those destined for everlasting life are elected before the foundation of the world. This should make us humble, not proud. None of us can lay claim to merit of our own. Our good works, the good things we do like going to church, getting baptized, being nice to people or trying to obey the Ten Commandments do not save us. All the credit for our salvation belongs to God and Him alone. Friends, this is a mystery. No one could

have guessed it if it had not been revealed to us. Redemption doesn't make sense to us because we like to take credit.

So what does Paul mean when he writes that *the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ?* He means that the appointed time has come, it is upon us now. The Father has given all authority and power to the Son. Everything in heaven and earth has come under His control. Once, all things were together in Christ, but because of the Fall, because of our sin, the world became corrupt and alienated from the Lord. But now, because of our redemption, the redeemed are united again by faith to Jesus Christ.

That brings us back to the point of our passage. We feel like diamonds in the rough. Our emotions, our circumstances, the opinions of others, govern how we think about ourselves. You struggle with that – and so do I. We need to discover again what God has done for us. We do that by praising the Lord through faith, trusting not in what we see and feel, but in what He has revealed in His Word, the mystery, if you will, of Christ's redemption. The writer of Hebrews wrote: "In putting everything under [Christ], God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to Him."

Everything has been brought under Christ's rule. But we must understand that by faith. Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck wrote:

Round about us we observe so many facts that seem to be unreasonable, so much undeserved suffering, so many unaccountable calamities, such an uneven and inexplicable distribution of destiny and such an enormous contrast between the extremes of joy and sorrow,

Anyone reflecting on these things is forced to choose between viewing the universe as if it were governed by the blind will of an unbenign deity . . . or upon the basis of Scripture and by faith, to rest in the absolute and sovereign, yet – however incomprehensible – wise and holy will of Him who will one day cause the full light of heaven to dawn upon these mysteries of life.

You and I have a choice. We grasp through faith what Jesus has done for us. Then, we will praise Him. More and more, our lives will be shaped more and more by our knowledge of our redemption instead of by our problems and troubles and feelings. When we seek God's truth and develop the practice of thanking Him for the spiritual blessings we have, we will think differently about ourselves and about God.

In Jesus Christ, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses. When we remember this, what God has done for us, our lives will be different.