

THE LETTERS TO THE EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS - PART III

THE FIRST CHAPTERS OF THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

I. The introduction here in this letter is very brief, consisting only of the address.

A. Unlike the letter to the Colossians, there is no reference to St. Timothy, who will later become the leader of the church in Ephesus. It may be that St. Paul had sent him on a mission when the letter was written.

B. As with other Pauline letters, the greeting is to the "holy ones," a term used nine more times in the letter. See Eph. 1:4, 15, 18; 2:19; 3:8, 18; 4:12; 5:3; 6:18. God's call to holiness is a special theme of this letter.

C. The phrase "in Ephesus" is in some versions, but not others, although all the ancient codices identify the letter as to the Ephesians. One possible explanation is that the letter was sent to the Ephesians first, but also meant as a letter for the whole region around Ephesus. It is possible that a scribe either one: (1) included the phrase "in Ephesus" to the letter to make it clear that the Ephesians received it first; or (2) excluded the phrase to indicate that other cities receive it as well. That conclusion would also explain why St. Paul at times seems to refer to people he has not seen. See Eph. 1:15, 3:2, 4:21.

II. The Ephesians hymn sets up the themes for the letter, especially emphasizing God's calling, forgiveness and unifying power through Jesus Christ.

A. The letter jumps right into a hymn in order to emphasize its centrality. As with the letter to the Colossians, there is also a description of St. Paul's thanksgiving and prayer for the people. But here it is after the hymn and thus more a part of the doctrinal section. The author here may have been especially eager to put this praise of God's providence right at the beginning to emphasize its centrality.

B. Stylistically, the hymn is one 203-word sentence in the original Greek. That structure, which combines numerous statements into one sentence, may have been an attempt to emphasize how all things are connected in Christ.

C. As with the Colossians hymn, the beginning refers to God the Father, the middle to Jesus Christ, and the last verses to the Holy Spirit. There is again a way of describing what we now call the persons of the Trinity working together.

D. There were also several hymns in the Old Testament praising the providence of God in defeating His people's enemies or disciplining His people. See Ex. 15:1-18; Tob. 13:1-18; Judith 16:1-17. Here the emphasis is on victory over sin.

E. The first verses focus on the idea of blessing; we bless God the Father who blesses us in Jesus through whom we have every other blessing. The term here (*eulogatos*) can mean bless or praise. The idea is that the same action blesses God by recognizing His majesty, love, and greatness, and makes us praiseworthy through His blessing. See Catechism 2626.

F. The hymn then turns to the first thing to praise God for, i.e., His calling from all time for His people to be "holy and without blemish before Him" and to be His adopted sons. There is here a reflection from Genesis of the primordial goodness of all things, especially humans, and of God's providence over all things. These blessings are always in His Son Christ Jesus.

- There is a strong notion of God arranging all things for His glory, which includes our own sanctification. The calling is also expressed in the plural, emphasizing the calling to salvation in a community.

- Verses 11 and 12 reiterate this theme. The letter is emphasizing that God is truly in charge of all things, although we are called to cooperate. Nothing happens without His permission, and nothing can defeat His plans. Cf. Rom. 1:28-39; Matt. 6:25-34.

G. Verses 6, 11, and 14 also focus on the fact that all of God's actions in history are "for the praise of His glory" or a similar phrase. The word for praise here (*epainos*) has a connotation of a public proclamation in order to make something known. God's actions in history make Him known, not only to us but also to the very court of heaven.

H. Verses 7-10 describe the workings of Christ in history, achieving our forgiveness through His sacrifice and uniting all things whatsoever, in heaven and on earth.

- The hymn speaks of the mystery of God's will. This term, which chapter 3 will discuss at greater length, introduces the workings of God as something that humans cannot understand of our own accord, but that is made comprehensible to us in Jesus.

- St. Paul speaks of the "fullness of times" to emphasize the unity of all ages on earth and possibly even some notion of

ages in heaven in Jesus Christ. Compare Gal. 4:4.

I. Verses 13 and 14 then turn to the proclamation of the gospel and its receipt by the Ephesians.

1. The letter now switches pronouns and refers to "you" rather than "we," as earlier. The term "you" could mean Gentiles, as opposed to Jews, or it could refer to the fact that the Ephesians were joined to the earlier Christians.

2. The letter then introduces the Holy Spirit, saying that the Ephesians have been "sealed with the promised Spirit."

- The prophets had long promised that the Spirit would be poured forth upon mankind. See, e.g., Ez. 36:25-31; Joel 3:1-2. This promise had been fulfilled at Pentecost, see Acts 2:1-21, and other times when the Apostles laid hands upon people, see Acts 8:14-16, 19:1-7; see also Acts 10:44-49.

- Here, St. Paul describes this gift as the "first installment" on the way toward "redeeming" or buying us back from sin to be God's possession and have an inheritance in heaven. See also 1 Cor. 6:20, 7:23; Acts 20:28. There is here as in Colossians both a sense of salvation here and now, but also a knowledge that we have only the first promise here.

III. The letter then moves onto a thanksgiving, which describes the glory shown in the Ephesians, again culminating in the authority of Christ and His Church.

A. The thanksgiving again refers to faith, hope and charity, but this time (unlike the Colossians hymn) with a deeper hope as the result of faith and love. St. Paul may have organized the virtues this way to lead into the promise of God in Christ, and to emphasize that we can see the faith and love at work, but the realm we hope in is more invisible.

- St. Paul asks that their hearts be enlightened to "know" their hope. The idea may be that we hope for something that we know only vaguely, which is difficult to describe. But as one grows in the spirit, one knows that joy and co-inheritance with Christ and His holy ones by experience, albeit imperfectly. The verb here (*eidon*) has the connotation of perceiving, or seeing with the mind, at a deeper level than ordinary knowledge. The idea is that the Ephesians already know that heaven is their hope, but St. Paul is praying that they perceive and sense this promise at a deep level.

B. The thanksgiving then goes on to praise the power God gave Jesus Christ (in His human nature) above all things whatsoever. Then Christ is given to the Church, giving her this great power through Christ over all things.

- Part of the message is that one should not be dazzled or afraid of the powers of this world, or even the powers of the celestial realm, for Christ rules them all and has been given to His Church.

- At the time this passage was written, probably in the early 60s, this claim would have been astonishing, for the Church was simply a small band of mostly lowly people, while the powers of Rome and Ephesus seemed great. But St. Paul prophesies that it is Christ who will triumph with His church.

IV. Chapter 2 then develops the theme of reconciliation, first by reconciling man with God, and second by reconciling the Jews and Gentiles, giving them a common inheritance.

A. The first 10 verses of chapter 2 then describe our redemption from sin, expanding on a theme in verses 21-23 of the first chapter of Colossians.

1. The passage begins dramatically by referring to the faith as nothing less than bringing the dead back to life.

- St. Paul may be building upon the dry bones image in Ezekiel, in which Israel is compared to a valley of dry scattered bones that comes together and comes to life in glory at the proclamation of the prophet. See Ez. 37:1-14.

- Jesus often refers to those who are physically dead as asleep, while those who are cut off from God are really dead. Compare Luke 15:32; Matt. 23:27-28 with Matt. 9:24; John 11:11; see also Rev. 3:1.

- We now sometimes refer to one in a state of grace as living in the Spirit and one in a state of original sin or mortal sin as dead to eternal life.

2. This original state is described as being subject to spirit of this age, the flesh and to the "power of the air" and "the spirit now at work in the disobedient."

- The idea is that, without Christ we would not be free, but would be slaves to the world, the flesh and the devil. One must choose between these kingdoms. See also Rom. 6:15-23. We are born into the kingdom that is subject to the instability of the air and to wrath, but are delivered to be co-heirs to a glorious kingdom. Cf. 2 Pet. 2:17; Jude 12-13.

3. Then the letter draws a dramatic contrast as God, rich in mercy, raises us to His kingdom to rule with Christ, even seated with Him.

- Pope John Paul II's encyclical on God the Father is entitled Dives in Misericordia, or Rich in Mercy. Part of this idea is that God sees the goodness He wants from us despite all of our sins, and seeks to bring it out. As the Holy Father pointed out there, mercy does not mean tolerating sin, but rather bringing out the goodness in each person, seeking the triumph of love over sin.

- The letter indicates that even now we are, in a sense, seated with Christ, sharing His power, but that later we will be shown riches beyond imagination. The double use of the term rich and riches (*ploutos*) may be a warning not to be enthralled with the riches of this world, for they are as nothing (air) compared to the solid riches of heaven. Cf. Mark 10:29-31; Rev. 3:17-18.

4. Verses 8 and 9 indicate that the salvation is by faith and not works, and thus we can claim no merit for it. See also Rom. 3:24-4:6; Gal. 2:15-21. It is not that works are irrelevant, for every Pauline letter includes a discourse on the way we must act, including warnings that those who act against the faith will not inherit the kingdom of God. See, e.g., Eph. 5:5; Gal. 5:19-21; 1 Cor. 6:9-10, 15:50. The initial grace of having divine life cannot be merited, but one can grow in merit by good deeds done in this state, and can diminish or lose the state by evil deeds. See Catechism 1855, 2010. Verse 10 thus says we are called by Christ to live in God's works, which have been prepared in advance; the idea is that there is a pattern of good works that God has entrusted us to, which we are called to carry out.

5. Verse 10 gives another image by describing us as "God's handiwork." The term here *poiama* implies artistry, or even poetry, something very personal and creative. The implication is that each one of us is a carefully crafted work by God through which He expresses His glory, and that He tries to cleanse from the stain of sin.

B. The next 8 verses of chapter 2 then switch over to a reflection on how the Gentiles (including the Ephesians) now share in the promises made to Israel.

1. This section begins with a reflection upon how before Christ they had not received the promises to Israel and in fact were "without hope and without God." St. Paul is supporting the value of the Old Covenant insofar as it showed the way to God and the love God has for us and gave promises of salvation and thus hope for the people. Elsewhere, St. Paul says that the Old Law is inadequate to save people and was useful because the inability to uphold it showed our need for another source of salvation. See, e.g., Rom. 3:9-31, 7:7-25; Gal. 3:15-29; Heb. 7:11-10:18. Here, St. Paul also says that the promises of the new Messianic kingdom and the savior in the Old Law were valuable, for they pointed the way to Christ. He thus argues against what would be called Marcionism, a belief that the Old Testament was not written by God and is thus not a part of the Bible.

- St. Paul argues that these promises to the ancient Jews is now made available to everyone through Jesus Christ, and thus that all Christians should look back upon them and see how they are now fulfilled.

2. Verses 14-18 then describes how Jesus has reconciled Jew and Gentile, previously separated by the rituals of the Old Law which called for the Chosen People to be separated, partially because of the danger that they would fall into pagan practices. Now with the gifts of Christ, shown for example at Pentecost, the new Chosen People can go forth into the world to proclaim the gospel.

- There is also perhaps a notion that if Jesus can reconcile Jews and Gentiles, He can reconcile all peoples. This reconciliation happens because Jesus establishes "one new person," presumably the Church who unites all people, and all people have God as their Father through the Spirit. The unity is also "in one body," which could also be the Church, described earlier and later in the letter as the body of Christ. The Church thus fulfills at least in part the prophecies of all nations living in peace under God. See, e.g., Is. 2:1-5, 8:23-9:6, 11:1-7; Micah 4:1-8; Zech. 9:9-10.

- The reference to "those who are far off and those who are near" may be a citation from Isaiah, who distinguished between the false peace of the world and the true peace achieved through God's forgiveness. See Is. 57:9.

- The "dividing wall of enmity" could be a reference to the separation in the Temple of the Gentiles from the Jews, the walls of enmity between nations in general, and/or the wall separating earth from heaven. In any case, it is the humanity of Jesus, crucified and raised that brings about the final unity.

C. The final 4 verses of chapter 2 then pile together images of our citizenship with the country of heaven, our membership in the common family of God, and our place in the temple of God that is the church.

1. Verse 19 begins with an image of the faithful being brought from sojourning in a foreign land to citizenship in one's own land.

- One can see the image as either: (1) we were living in the world and are now brought to the presence of God in a new spiritual land, which is our natural home, see Heb. 12:22-24; or (2) in the state of sin, we were foreigners to the holiness of God, but through Christ have been made citizens of heaven, with the "holy ones," which presumably means the angels and saints in heaven and the other faithful on earth.

- In either case, there is a notion that we are at once citizens of specific nations on earth, but also have a citizenship with the kingdom of heaven. See, e.g., Vatican II Council, *Lumen Gentium* 9.

2. Verse 19 also says that we are now all members of the family of God. The family is the primary society upon which every other society should be built, showing love to each other in image of the love God has for us. See Catechism 2206-07. On earth, families must be limited in size. However, because God is unlimited, and because the holy ones in heaven are not limited by earthly constraints, all peoples can be joined to this one family of God.

3. Verses 20-22 then reflect upon the people of God as His new Temple.

- Jesus had described Himself as the new Temple that would be destroyed and then rebuilt in three days. See John 2:19-21. Now the Church as the body of Christ is described as the new Temple.

- The Temple was the dwelling place of God on earth from which His glory showed forth and, according to Ezekiel, from which waters would come to cleanse all lands. See Ez. 47:1-12. Now the People of God have become this Temple, showing forth the glory of God and pouring forth His grace to the world. See 1 Pet. 2:4-8; Catechism 756;

Lumen Gentium 6.

- Each person has a place in this Temple, and the faithful will become pillars in it, as Revelation later promises. See Rev. 3:7.
- The emphasis is on the centrality of Christ as the capstone, which is needed at the center to maintain the balance of the structure, and on the Apostles as needed to maintain the stability. Here as elsewhere holiness and salvation are always in the context of Christ and His Church.