

Scripture Reading for July 11 2021

Ephesians 2:1-10, 17-22 (New Testament for Everyone – *adapted*)

² So where do you come into it all? Well, you were dead because of your offences and sins! ² That was the road you used to travel, keeping in step with this world's 'present age'; in step, too, with the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is, even now, at work among people whose whole lives consist of disobeying God. ³ Actually, that's how all of us used to behave, conditioned by physical desires. We used to do what our flesh and our minds were urging us to do. What was the result? We too were subject to wrath in our natural state, just like everyone else.

⁴ But when it comes to mercy, God is rich! He had such great love for us that ⁵ he took us at the very point where we were dead through our offences, and made us alive together with *Christ* (yes, you are saved by sheer grace!). ⁶ He raised us up with him, and made us sit with him – in the heavenly places, in *Messiah* Jesus! ⁷ This was so that in the ages to come he could show just how unbelievably rich his grace is, the kindness he has shown us in *Christ* Jesus.

⁸ How has this all come about? You have been saved by grace, through faith! This doesn't happen on your own initiative; it's God's gift. ⁹ It isn't on the basis of works, so no one is able to boast. ¹⁰ This is the explanation: God has made us what we are. God has created us in *Messiah* Jesus for the good works that he prepared, ahead of time, as the road we must travel.

¹⁷ So the *Messiah* came and gave the good news. Peace had come! Peace, that is, for those of you who were a long way away, and peace, too, for those who were close at hand. ¹⁸ Through him, you see, we both have access to the father in the one spirit.

¹⁹ This is the result. You are no longer foreigners or strangers. No: you are fellow-citizens with God's holy people. You are members of God's household. ²⁰ You are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus *Christ* himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is fitted together, and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² You, too, are being built up together, in him, into a place where God will live by the spirit.

Sermon: “God’s Rescue Plan and Purpose”

The lectionary takes us to the Letter to the Ephesians for a few weeks, and so that is what we will do! However, I won’t be following the precise order given and will instead provide some thematic samples from this letter over the next four Sundays. Let me begin with a brief introduction. While the very first verse says the letter is from Paul and is to the church in Ephesus,¹ there is reason to question both of those things. Concerning the audience, the oldest manuscripts do not have the word “Ephesus” in the title. Moreover, the contents of the letter do not seem to address issues within a specific church but are more generic.² For those reasons it is thought this letter was an *instructional* document which was circulated to a series of churches that Paul established.³ Concerning authorship, this letter has subtle linguistic and theological differences⁴ from Paul’s undisputed letters, such as Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians.⁵ Consequently, many scholars consider this letter was written after Paul’s death by one of his *close* colleagues, perhaps as late as 80-90 CE. Pseudonymous authorship was common in the biblical world and wasn’t seen as plagiarism; rather, it was a way of honoring a leader and preserving their ideas and teaching.⁶ I mention this *not* to disturb you or create doubt. After all, the New Testament collection was formed because the broad, church community as a *whole* saw these various texts as *authoritative* because God’s presence was *experienced* through them, rather than simply because of *who* actually wrote them.⁷ Second, I mention this because many people are inclined to dismiss “Paul” as one who puts down women because of what the writer of the Ephesians has to say about “wives being submissive to their husbands” in chapter 5.⁸ Ladies: I totally get it! What can happen, though, is that *all* of Paul’s writings are therefore rejected as being irrelevant for today’s modern world. But if Paul didn’t *actually* write this specific letter, and it was written after his death by one of his more conservative Jewish-Christian disciples, then perhaps we need to take the undisputed letters of Paul a little more seriously.⁹

Regardless of these questions, Ephesians an important and much-loved letter; it was John Calvin’s favorite! It is a message that stresses unity in the practical life of the church, along with God’s vast mercy, wisdom, and grace, and the universal extent of the life-giving work of Jesus the Messiah. One of the things the writer emphasizes in the first two chapters is that God has a *plan* for history, one that began before creation and which culminates in Jesus Christ as savior of the whole world.¹⁰ Unfortunately, many translations use the word “predestination” in various places, and good Calvinists

¹ Traditionally, Paul wrote this letter in around very late 50s or early 60s CE to the church in Ephesus (from prison).

² As in the case of 1 Corinthians, for example.

³ This letter has similarities to Colossians – and some suggest Ephesians is that letter referenced in Col 4:6 (to Laodicea).

⁴ This includes, vocabulary, Greek style, and theological emphasis. Moreover, there is no personal greeting which is seen as being both untypical of Paul and very odd – especially given that Paul had spent some time in Ephesus (and elsewhere).

⁵ Add to that list, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon.

⁶ This same employment of the apostles’ “authority” is thought to be true of the Gospel writers too.

⁷ There is much more on the canon of Scripture that could be said, but this is a whole other topic!

⁸ See Eph 5:22-24. (Even this teaching needs to be seen in its broader context – Eph 5:21-6:9.)

⁹ A close look at Paul’s undisputed letters reveals no such misogynous language; see, for example, Gal 3:28.

¹⁰ Eph 1:3-14. (Inclusivity of Jews and non-Jews in God’s salvation is a key theme in this letter.)

– including Presbyterians – can be inclined to sit back and wait for God to act and for history to simply unfold.¹¹ If that were what the writer intended, why would he spend the second half of the letter exhorting *us into action*; that would be totally pointless - if everything was literally predestined. No, we have a vital and constructive role. Our *choices* and *actions* matter – both to the world around us and to God. We need to be careful *not* to read chapter 1 in isolation from the rest of the letter, nor to read this merely through the lens of Calvin. What it *does* affirm, however, is that God is engaged in history, and that is a message for every generation.

Our reading from chapter 2 expands on God’s drama of salvation by presenting it in three theatrical acts.¹² The first act presents “*The way we were.*”¹³ This Jewish-Christian author does not distinguish his own past from that of his non-Jewish Christian readership.¹⁴ In somewhat flamboyant language, he states that we are all sinners, worthy of God’s displeasure.¹⁵ He calls this sinful state one of *death*.¹⁶ The second act presents “*The saving actions of God.*”¹⁷ The simple reality is that “dead” people cannot liberate themselves from the enslaving power of death. God’s act in raising Jesus from the dead includes, says the writer, the giving of new life to believers, who are now also raised and enthroned with him.¹⁸ The resurrection was not merely a spectacular divine event in the past, it embraces all believers, because it happened not only to Jesus but to them – and us - too. Put differently, God sees us as belonging to the risen and exalted Son. How does this come about? The writer expresses this in two ways. First, he says it is a *work* of God, not one of ourselves. Only *God* can bring the dead to life and this occurs because of God’s *rich mercy* and *immense love* toward us.¹⁹ It is *God* who has taken the initiative. The writer repeats himself in one of those most memorable and reassuring lines in the Bible: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of our actions, so that no one may boast.”²⁰ Where does Jesus fit in then? That’s the second part; in the previous chapter the writer makes clear that Jesus the Messiah paid the ransom price through his death on the cross.²¹ This is the language of liberating slaves in the market place and, in Jewish terms, mirrors the Passover lamb that resulted in the liberation of Israel from slavery to Egypt.²² Now non-Jewish Christians, including you and me, might think that’s all ancient history and

¹¹ This also perhaps illustrates how translation committees are influenced by their embedded theology.

¹² In this way this letter mirrors Paul’s letter to the Romans and so firmly establishes this as Pauline.

¹³ See Eph 2:1 – 3; Rom 1-3.

¹⁴ Note the use of “you” (for non-Jews) and “we/us” as inclusive. (See also [10].)

¹⁵ Eph 2:3; cf. Rom 8:22-24. The “ruler of the power of the air” (v2) does not refer to human opposition (e.g., Caesar) but to satanic forces (see Eph 6:12), over which Christ reigns supreme (1:20-23).

¹⁶ Eph 2:1, 5. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Life-in-the-Spirit.pdf> .

¹⁷ Eph 2:4–8; Rom 4-11.

¹⁸ Eph 2:5-6. This is subtly (yet importantly) different from the theology in Paul’s undisputed letters. Our elevation has *already* happened according to this writer, yet Paul in Rom 6:8 and Phil 3:7-12 says it is yet to come. It is, I suggest, unwise to try and to homogenize or resolve this difference here. Instead, recognize that God sees us as belonging to the Son.

¹⁹ Eph 2:4.

²⁰ Eph 2:8-9, slightly modified.

²¹ Eph 1:7. “Redemption,” (see also Rom 3:24-25) literally “paid with a price” is analogous to liberating or freeing a slave (cf. Mark 10:45); see also Eph 3:13 (“ . . . the blood of Christ”). Such terse words are loaded with (understood) significance.

²² See Exod 12.

irrelevant. No, says the author of Ephesians, Jesus is the *new* Passover lamb²³ and through his death we *all* – Jews *and* non-Jews - have been set free from slavery to sin. Ephesians 1:7-8 puts it this way: “*our* sins have been forgiven – through the wealth of his [God’s] *grace* which he lavished on us.”²⁴ And so we come back to unmerited divine grace once again.²⁵

And now to the third and final act, namely, “*The good works of the Christian community.*”²⁶ We have been rescued by God for a purpose, namely to do good in the world under the authoritative umbrella of Jesus the Messiah. This was always God’s intention, but when we were slaves to sin, we were unable to carry them out. But we have been made free, by God’s grace and through the faithfulness of Jesus, we are now able – with the Spirit’s help²⁷ – to joyfully do those tasks that God has in mind. Now, we can choose *not* to partner with God, of course, and that is why the writer later exhorts his readers to act responsibly and in keeping with Christ’s mission.²⁸ What this also means is that we are not robots predestined for act a certain way, and neither are we completely independent of God. To be fully human is to recognize we are made in God’s image - responsible, creative, moral, yet free; that is our true identity as seen through the eyes of faith. In brief, God has adopted us as his children²⁹ and called to work *with* him – not *for* him - to bring about the kinds of things God wants to see done in the world, as modelled by Jesus Christ.

Those three acts, then, summarize the overall drama of God’s rescue plan and purposes. A fundamental element in Pauline theology is that we have been saved by grace through faith – and that this is a gift of God and not based on our own merit.³⁰ While this is wonderful news, we often don’t live or behave in ways that is consistent with that statement. Some Christians live fearfully yet in hope that they can eventually make peace with a perceived angry God by their doing *enough good deeds*.³¹ Alternatively, they hope that they can somehow muster *enough faith* in God to make it! Both are all about *our* effort. Paul, however, stresses that we are saved by faith in *God’s* gracious provision and *not* through something we can conjure up on our own. This is fantastic news! Let’s embrace it.³² However, although we don’t earn our salvation through our good deeds, we are now called to freely do such things in gratitude and with passionate joy for that is why God made us and rescued us. These good works are a natural expression of Christ alive in us, revealing God’s love among us and to the whole world.

²³ This is a key theme in John’s Gospel. While the author of Ephesians only mentions such words, he is thoroughly *Pauline* and so Paul’s whole theology (i.e., his earlier undisputed letters) can be assumed to be known to the letter’s readership.

²⁴ In Eph 1:5,11 the theme of being adopted as God’s children through the actions of Jesus the Messiah is also mentioned.

²⁵ We might find these Old Testament parallels hard to understand today, but their existence reenforced was of critical importance to Jewish Christians. God’s rescue acts have been repeated many times in the Old Testament; God hears the cries of people who call out to God for help (e.g., exodus, the book of Judges, exile). Jesus the Messiah is the culmination of this pattern – and God is still in the rescuing and reconciling business today.

²⁶ Eph 2:9-10; Rom 12-16. This, then, very briefly states what it means to be a Christian.

²⁷ See Eph 1:13-14.

²⁸ See Eph 4-6. There is then a balance with divine sovereignty and human action.

²⁹ See Eph 1:5,11.

³⁰ Eph 2:5b, 8.

³¹ A form of Pelagianism (or semi-Pelagianism).

³² We were dead and are now alive, in bondage and now free.

One of the things the writer then emphasizes is that the dividing walls that traditionally separate people, specifically Jews and non-Jews in those days, have been brought crashing down by God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ.³³ That principle continues to apply today to the tearing down of all kinds of barriers that artificially separate one human being from another. We all know what kinds of barriers we are talking about: race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, politics, wealth, denomination, etc. We are *all* made in God's image and God wants us all to be *one* in Christ. That notion was challenging then, which is why the letter was written in the first place, and it's challenging now.³⁴ After all, God's covenant with Abraham was intended to be a blessing to the *whole* world,³⁵ and Jesus came to be the savior of the *whole* world. That being the case, are *we* going to work with God in deconstructing barriers and division and, instead, build up something beautiful together, *and* in partnership with God? This bold construction image is how the chapter ends. Those "in Christ"³⁶ are members of God's inclusive household.³⁷ Together, the writer says, "we are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom we are being built together into a dwelling place *for God by his Spirit*."³⁸

This is a powerful image and the church hasn't always lived up to this high calling.³⁹ Many traditional churches enact this unity by "sharing the peace of Christ" with each other during the worship service. That act is not meant to be simply a polite handshake – or nudging elbows these days – but a way of saying that we repudiate the traditional barriers of hostility as having no place in Christ's Church. Practically – and more positively - that means we will be hospitable towards each other, be good neighbors, act kindly and generously, etc., because those are the good deeds that God wants to see occur in his household. When we see that happening it means the kingdom of God is present here – at least in this location.⁴⁰

Recall too that, for Jews, God's presence traditionally resided in the Temple in Jerusalem. Various New Testament writers, including Paul, present God's new way of working. They state that God's glorious presence is now embodied in Jesus, in a *person* rather than a *place*.⁴¹ So, if Jesus is the new temple, what happened after the ascension? Paul regards the church as the "body of Christ"⁴² and that makes

³³ Eph 2:11-22. (Note too that the Temple in Jerusalem also had physical segregation: men and women, Jews and non-Jews.)

³⁴ Not least, it is challenging *ethically*.

³⁵ Gen 12:2-3.

³⁶ For being "in Christ" see Eph 1:1b, 4, 7, 10-11, 13; 2:13.

³⁷ Eph 2:19.

³⁸ Eph 2:20-22, adapted. See also 1 Cor 3:11, 16, 6:15a; 2 Cor 6:16 and 1 Pet 2:4-5.

³⁹ The Residential Schools legacy and crisis being one contemporary Canadian example.

⁴⁰ This is not a static thing, but dynamic – and expect resistance and opposition!

⁴¹ See John 2:19–22; 4:23–24, Matt 12:6. This also connects with the claim, "The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10; Matt 9:6; Luke 5:24). Such a claim challenges the traditional function of the temple itself, with its sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin. (See also [37].)

⁴² See 1 Cor 12:13, 27; Rom 12:4; Col 1:18, 24. (Note: Paul's undisputed letters were written *before* the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.)

the church *community* the new temple, the place — or more accurately, *the people* — in whom God’s Spirit resides.⁴³ As the writer of Ephesians says, Jesus Christ is the *cornerstone* of this metaphorical new construction,⁴⁴ and God is at work — by his Spirit — reconciling people into one new dwelling place for God. This is the location where you would (at least) expect to find the divine presence today.⁴⁵ Of course, it requires that we cooperate with God in that endeavor, together with *all* those who Jesus calls his own. At a very minimum, that means denominational barriers need to come down; we have to reconcile our differences and work together in Christ’s name as God’s new community. And when we see that happening authentically it means the kingdom of God is present here — in Amherstburg and beyond.

In conclusion, the writer of Ephesians paints an amazing, “good news” picture of God’s gracious act of saving his people through Messiah Jesus and of God’s desire to reconcile all into one family with Christ at its head.⁴⁶ This kind of language — including Christ as the cornerstone — is not unique to Paul, we hear the same in the letter of 1 Peter. I therefore end with his words of exhortation, words that also remind us of life “before and after,” of God’s new temple of which we are invited to be a part, and of God’s great mercy:

“Come to [Jesus], to that living stone. Yes, humans rejected him, but God chose him and values him very highly! Like living stones, yourselves, you are being built up into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices⁴⁷ that will be well pleasing to God through Jesus the Messiah. . . [For] you are a ‘chosen race; a royal priesthood’; a holy nation; a people for God’s possession. Your purpose is to announce the virtuous deeds of the one who called you *out of darkness into his amazing light*. Once you were ‘no people’; now you are ‘God’s people’. Once you had not received mercy; now you have received mercy.”⁴⁸

That is God’s plan and purpose for us. Let us be those people. Amen. Let us pray.

⁴³ The Holy Spirit dwells in the church, but *not* exclusively so, nor is the Spirit the prerogative of the church. The Spirit is always going *ahead* of the church in *God’s mission (missio Dei)*; we see this in Acts 10 and on Paul’s missionary journeys.

⁴⁴ Think of the lyrics of that great hymn: “The Church’s One Foundation . . . is Jesus Christ her Lord.” Note that the construction image is not a *physical* building but a new living *community* of those “in Christ.”

⁴⁵ Note: the risen Jesus passes on his authority to the church; see John 20:21–23; Matt 28:18–20; Luke 24:45–49. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Living-Stones.pdf> .

⁴⁶ Eph 1:20-23.

⁴⁷ This includes those good deeds — holiness, faithfulness, and mutual love (1 Pet 1:22).

⁴⁸ 1 Pet 2:4-5; 9-10. (Jesus as “cornerstone” is also mention in v7.) See also [44].