

Ephesians 1.15-23

Background

A general, circular letter to more than one church: “in Ephesus” missing in some of oldest manuscripts. Most likely Ephesus one of a number of churches to which sent, perhaps personalised later.

Given that Paul had spent 3 fruitful years in Ephesus, makes no sense that writes so impersonally in 1.15 “I have heard of your faith in the lord Jesus...” and in 4.20-21 “That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus.”

Written from prison (3.1), most likely in Rome late in his life (61-62AD.)

Context

Social-religious-historical.

Paul has waged an ongoing theological and spiritual battle against:

1. Judaizers – who believed Gentiles had first to become Jews to be heirs to God’s promises, and therefore comply with the Torah (inc. the key markers of Judaism – circumcision, purity laws and Sabbath-keeping.
2. Gentiles who believed that their inclusion meant that God had now rejected Israel/the Jews.
3. Pagan beliefs and esp. superstitions. Talbert refers to Greek magical papyri quoting Betz (1986): “The people whose religion is reflected in the papyri agree that humanity is inescapably at the whim of the forces of the universe... Individuals seem to be nothing but marionettes at the end of power lines, pulled here and there without their knowledge by invisible forces.” Magic provided a sense of security for the insecure, a sense of help for the helpless, and a sense of comfort for the hopeless. (Talbert, 18). Then quotes Best: “Almost everyone in the ancient world believed that the way they lived was controlled by the stars, various deities and sub-deities and by magic exercised by other people... fate determined what should happen.” Talbert goes on, “No deity who did not offer relief from such oppression could expect devotees in this milieu.”

This is fundamental to understanding the book as a whole, and particularly to what Paul is saying in 1.3-12, bearing in mind that Christ pre-existed creation and indeed “all things came into being through him” (John 1.3). It is natural, therefore, for Paul to speak of all God’s blessings, from the beginning, being in Christ/through Jesus Christ.

The literary form of vv.1-14 is a *berakah*, a standard Jewish blessing (of God) for blessings bestowed on his people, i.e it is thoroughly Jewish in form.

vv.3-12 = a cosmic review of the unfolding purposes of God in the past, a celebration of what God has done in the present - through Christ’s incarnation, and a proclamation of the future – when God’s purposes will be consummated by his Son (when he returns to consummate his reign on earth).

vv.3-6 look back – to Israel’s election, the promises to Abraham

- “He chose us in Christ” - v.4 (see texts below)
- “to be holy and blameless before him” – v.4 (see Exod 19.5-6)
- “He destined us for adoption as his children” – v.5 (see e.g. Exod 4.22, Hos 11)
- “to the praise of his glorious grace...” – v.5 (see Isa 43.7, 20)

vv.7-8a celebrate the present – redemption through Christ’s atoning sacrifice

- 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.

vv.8b-10 look forward - to the fullness of time.

- “With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will... as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him...” – vv.8b-10

When Paul uses language of “we having been chosen... predestined...” and “God having made known to *us* the mystery of his will”, and “that we might live for the praise of his glory”, he is employing OT terms and concepts for what God has done for *Israel, his chosen people, his son*.

Deuteronomy 7:6

For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

Exodus 19:4-6

‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.

Psalm 135:4

For the Lord has chosen Jacob for Himself,
Israel for His own possession.

Isaiah 41:8-9

“But you, Israel, My servant,
Jacob whom I have chosen,
Descendant of Abraham My friend,
You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth,
And called from its remotest parts
And said to you, ‘You are My servant,
I have chosen you and not rejected you.

**Also: Isa 43.1,3,10; 44.1-2; 45.4; Hos 11.1;
Amos 3:2**

“You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth;
Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”

Israel’s predestination was to fulfil a purpose, as God’s chosen people, to be a witness to the nations and to be the descendants of Abraham through/in whom all nations would one day be blessed (Gen 12.1-3). She is God’s chosen instrument to be blessed and to bring God’s blessing to the whole world.

It is on this understanding that Simeon declares that Jesus will “be a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” i.e. he will be the true Israelite, the one who will fulfil Israel’s call to bring glory to God, and to Israel, and blessing to all nations.

This should give us pause to ask, who is the “we” Paul is referring to in vv.3-12?

Is it all Christians to whom he is writing – Jew and Gentile, or – in these opening verses (up to end of v.12) specifically Israel/the Jewish people?

The first strong indicator that it is the latter, apart from the language of election and adoption which we have already seen belonged to Israel alone until Christ, comes at the end **of v.12** : “... so that **we**, *who were the first* to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.”

The second, and I would say clinching proof comes immediately following, at the beginning **of v.13** In him **you also**, when you heard the word of truth...” The “you also” is in contradistinction to the “we” used up until here.

It is only in v.14, once he has spoken of the sealing of the promised Holy Spirit whom Joel prophesied would be poured out on all flesh, i.e. Jew and Gentile, as Peter affirmed on the Day of Pentecost, that Paul begins to employ the 2nd person plural pronoun “**Our**” to speak of Jew and Gentile together (v.14). After Pentecost Gentiles are brought in and share the inheritance with believing Israel.

Therefore, in summary:

- in vv. 3-12 Paul speaks as a Jew of God’s fore-ordained blessings on his own people, the Jews/Israel, culminating in their redemption in Christ, using ‘**we**’
- in v. 13 Paul speaks to Gentiles who have come to faith in Christ, ‘using **you**’
- In v.14 Paul speaks of both Jew and Gentile, united now as one people - “God’s own people” - by the outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit, using ‘**our**’.

What Paul has done is to repeat what he has said at greater length elsewhere, particularly in Romans e.g. 1.16; 3.1-2; chs 9-11:

The status of the Jews as God’s chosen people has not been abrogated; their status as God’s chosen instrument to bring blessing has not been revoked. Rather it was fulfilled through Jesus the (Jewish) Messiah.

“Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4.22), and “to the Jew first” (Rom 1.16).

Paul is aware and proud of his own Jewishness, and remembers that - even as “the Apostle to the Gentiles” - his call was to be God’s “chosen instrument to bring (Jesus’) name before Gentiles and kings *and before the*

people of Israel” (Acts 9.15). Paul’s practice everywhere was to go first to Jews, to the synagogue, then to the Gentiles.

Jesus affirmed Israel’s priority in his own mission. See esp. John 4.21-26 and Mark 7.24-30 (= Matt 15.21-28 “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”). Also John’s statement in John 1.11.

Peter too, in the days immediately after Pentecost, addressed his fellow Jews in Solomon’s Portico, closing with these words: “... You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ When God raised up his servant (Jesus), he sent him **first to you**, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.”

All the first witnesses were Jews!

- ⇒ Eph 1.3-14 is both a Jewish *berakah* (blessing) on God in praise of his blessings *firstly* to Israel (chosen, predestined as firstborn son, vv.3-12) and then on *all* who believe in Jesus Christ (vv.13-14).

vv. 15-23

The petition that follows is premised on the fact that, as Gentiles, they had not been brought up on the Scriptures.

As Paul says in 2.12, they were

- “separated from Christ,
- alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and
- strangers to the covenants of promise,
- having no hope and
- without God in the world”.

Clearly their election post-Pentecost cannot be read back into vv.3-12

Not having the Scriptures, Gentiles are largely ignorant of

- ⇒ God’s character
- ⇒ God’s mighty acts of deliverance of Israel, works of great power, performed by his command and his mighty outstretched arm

Everything they do know they have received from Paul and their other Jewish teachers and brethren.

But Paul wants them to come to a full knowledge of God's great purposes and blessings:

- how they have been worked out, PAST
- are being worked out, and PRESENT
- will be worked out – FUTURE

all in and through Christ.

They have some catching up to do on their Jewish brethren, BUT they have the HS to help them.

Paul's prayer (vv.16-23)

1. Thanksgiving (v.16) for

- your faith in the Lord Jesus. cf. 6.24 "Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ", It is because of their faith that they have come into their inheritance with Israel.
- your love toward *all* the saints (presumably Jew and Gentile) – sure sign of true faith being outworked in their lives and the unity in Christ which Paul will write more on in ch 2.

2. Petition that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory (i.e. to whom all glory belongs), may give you

- a. **"a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him"** – these two gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12.8), needed to make up for their unfamiliarity with the scriptures, and probably the inaccessibility of the scriptures to them.

Jews had the scriptures which revealed God's character (e.g. Exodus 34.6-7; Hosea 11) and pointed them to Jesus, as Jesus showed on the road to Emmaus and on their return to Jerusalem in Luke 24 – doubtless expounding such scriptures as Deut 18, Isa 9.6-7; 25; 35.5; 53; Psalms 2, 22, 110; Micah 5.2; Malachi 3.1-3.

The only way to grow in knowledge of God is to get to know Jesus, "having the eyes of your hearts enlightened" as Paul puts it in v.18. This is what Simeon prophesied of Jesus: he will be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" Luke 2.31f.

Gifts of wisdom and knowledge: John 14.26; 16.13; 1 Cor 2.12. Only by the power of the HS could humans understand God's mind and

workings. Gentiles needed this even more than Jews, whose minds were already shaped – to a greater or lesser degree – by the scriptures.

This ‘knowledge’ is more than just intellectual, it is “Knowledge of him”, it is relational – to know Jesus truly as Lord and Saviour. Cf. John 14.9 “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip?”

Having the eyes of their hearts enlightened, they will know (vv.18b-19):

- a. what is **the hope** to which he has called you – a sure hope, our ‘inheritance’ - because sealed by the HS and grounded in Christ’s victory over death. It is an eternal hope – not just for this life only but for the life to come.
- b. “what are **the riches of his glorious inheritance** in/among the saints”. Foulkes: “The fellowship of Christians is the sphere in which the inheritance of God is found”
1 Peter 1.4 tells us that it is “an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you”
We shall see God, and we shall be like him Rev 22.3f.; 1 John 3.2; Phil 3.21
- c. “what is the immeasurable greatness of **his power** toward us who believe, according to the working of his **great might** that he worked in Christ Jesus when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,
 - far above all rule and authority and power and dominion cf. Eph 6
 - and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come
 - and he has put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

NB. God’s great power has been *demonstrated and seen* in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Not simply an abstract concept. Inward transformation of a person’s life is an extraordinary testimony to God’s power at work, but not easily seen by others unless they’re close and know the person well over a period of time. Jesus’ resurrection was a powerful miracle, witnessed by more than 500 people (1 Cor 15).

The Gentiles had not experience God's mighty acts of power as Israel had, but they are seeing the word of God testified to by acts of power/signs – Acts is full of them

- paralysed man and Dorcas in ch 9
- the HS falling on Cornelius' household as on the Jews at Pentecost
- 14-20, during Paul's 3 missionary journeys, see many signs and miracles.

At Iconium, 14.3 "So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who testified to the word of his grace by granting signs and wonders to be done through them."

At Ephesus, first thing asks them is if they received the HS when they became believers (Acts 19.2). The HS falls on them and they speak in tongues and prophesy. Summary statement (19.11): God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them."

This is Paul's answer to all pagan religions and superstitions. Jesus is Lord of all – not just Israel, or even the earth, but the whole cosmos.

It is he who has all spiritual power and authority, hence what he writes in ch 6 about spiritual warfare. In Christ they too have victory over Satan and evil. See Acts 19.11-20 as answer to the need for signs/evidence of Jesus' power. See too, for example Acts 9.32-43.

V. 22-23 The Church

Just as Christ is supreme and reigns over all things, so he reigns over the Church – as its head. Paul will say more about this in ch 5.25ff using analogy of marriage.

Foulkes: "It is God's purpose that the Church should be the full expression of Jesus Christ, who himself fills everything there is."

In Ephesians Paul stresses the cosmic dimensions of the Church, - see 3.10

"Through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Thanksgiving is a common opening petition in Paul's prayers. How do you begin your prayer time? How much time do you give to giving thanks to God? What positive effect might opening prayer with thanksgiving have on us/our prayers/our relationship with God?
2. Note what Paul gives thanks for: not personal blessings but their faith in God and their love for one another. How central is that kind of petition to your prayer life – for yourself, family members, others?
3. Paul's prayer overflows into praise for God's blessings, greatness, and headship. Again, what part does praise play in your prayer life?
4. Note *what* Paul prays for them in vv.17-19. What stands out for you? Do you pray for these things for yourself and others?
5. What do you understand by your "inheritance among the saints"?
6. What does it look like when Christ is not submitted to as the head of the Church?
7. What, practically, do you think it means for the Church to express/bear the image of the fullness of Christ? What would make outsiders see and speak of the Church in this way?