

s-Ephes. series 1-09-A Seal Upon Your Heart
Eph. 1:1-14 (P10B) *He destined us for adoption*
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A SEAL UPON YOUR HEART

When you are planning a trip to a new city or maybe even to a country you've never visited before, I bet you spend a lot of time before you leave, browsing the library or prowling the bookstores. If you're like me, you like to get some idea of the place you're headed, and what there is to see and do when you get there. Most of us, I think, like to have some knowledge of the local customs when we travel. What language will people speak? What is there to eat? And the all-important, How can I keep from looking too much like a typical tourist?

I was reminded of this kind of pre-trip research when I opened a catalog that came in the mail the other day. A very pretty sleeveless dress was touted as being "just the thing" to wear to visit a mosque. So appropriate! So modest! Well, if you don't have enough sense to avoid wearing sleeveless clothing to conservative worship sites of any persuasion, then let me give you some advice: please don't do it. Bare legs and arms, and in some instances bare heads, are simply not done. Perhaps nobody will scold you, but you will stick out like... well, like a tacky tourist who doesn't have any manners.

No, it really helps a lot to know something about the place you're going to visit. And so, before we begin the sermon series on Ephesians, I think it would help to know a little about the place and what was going on there way back in the first century when the letter was written.

If you've traveled in modern-day Turkey, you probably visited the site of this ancient city; but unless you're a cultural anthropologist it's hard to get much sense of culture from viewing crumbled ruins. Words—documents, stories, language forms—all these things really help. Think of how little we understood ancient Egypt until the Rosetta Stone was deciphered, for instance.

Today, we're quite fortunate because any of us can pick up a copy of the Letter to the Ephesians, and hold in our hands a good translation of a very ancient document that outlines a lot about thought and culture in that city in the year one. I wish there were such letters available about, say, Stonehenge, or Canyon de Chelly, down in Arizona. One more reason why the Bible is a very remarkable book.

So, before we start on our journey, let's take the time to study up a little. I suspect that very few of us have participated in a Bible study on Ephesians...we haven't offered one here in the eleven years or so I've been your pastor. But here's a chance to learn all about it, with no homework assignments or quizzes to ruin your weekends. All I ask is that you do your best to make it to church as often as humanly possible for the next six Sundays, so that every one of you can truthfully say that you've studied Ephesians.

Ephesus was a large and important sea port, on the Aegean coast of the Roman colony of Asia. Emperor Augustus titled it "First and Greatest Metropolis of Asia," and it was one of the religious centers of the Empire, dedicated to the goddess Artemis. It also featured a theater that could seat 25,000 people, a very famous library, and good selection of the various baths, aqueducts, forums, and gymnasiums that made Roman cities so amazing.

Christianity in Ephesus was, of course, initiated by the Apostle Paul. He stayed in Ephesus longer than in any other of his mission posts, using it as his base of operation for other evangelistic trips in Asia Minor. He probably was living in Ephesus when he wrote the letters to the Corinthians and to the Romans.

Despite that, Ephesians itself was probably not written by Paul at all. There are too many linguistic differences with Paul's usual style and vocabulary. Also the writer of Ephesians uses some key phrases that Paul never used, such as dividing wall, fellow citizens, and heavenly places. And if Corinthians and Romans seem challenging to understand, note that Ephesians uses even longer, more convoluted, and—if you can believe it—even more redundant sentences than one usually finds in the “authentic” letters of Paul. Many paragraphs consist of just one long sentence. Furthermore, it reads more like a sermon than like a letter.

Most important are the theological differences that are found in Ephesians, differences that tell us that it probably was written after Paul's death and in the time of the emerging Christian church. Ephesians has two themes: one is the PRESENT salvation of believers—with no mention of an expectation that Christ would return, and the other is the setting of certain highly subjective rules for Christian individuals and households to follow. These guidelines are important windows into first century Judeo-Christian values, but must be approached carefully by the modern Christian—we need to remember that we don't know who made these rules, so we should take them with a grain of salt.

So let us begin at the beginning.

Ephesians starts out with a blessing, and what a blessing it is! This whole passage—and in fact the whole letter—is one big resounding song of hope. I think that alone must account for Ephesians' enduring popularity as biblical text. Who hasn't felt comforted by the phrase, “He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ,” or felt humbled by reference to “the riches of his grace” which have been lavished upon us with pleasure? And who of us has not wondered about the mystery of this promised “seal of the Holy Spirit”?

Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor tells a wonderful story from her own childhood, one that awakens this sense of wonder and blessing. Her grandmother was a tough, stern woman, and “an awesome presence, especially to a child.” Grandmother was known most for “her shrewd sense and her bad temper.” Even her appearance was intimidating; both of her legs had been amputated due to untreated diabetes, and she had to wear dark glasses to protect sensitive eyes. Taylor says that her grandmother looked like “a handicapped bomber pilot.” Not the image we usually have about our grandmas!

And yet, this fearsome lady lavished love upon her grandchildren. Whenever they came to visit, she made sure they had special treats. She gave them piles of presents, and spent many a long, lazy afternoon simply enjoying being with them. During visits, each child received one whole evening one-on-one with Grandmother, getting pampered and spoiled. Taylor recalls one such night: “When my night came she treated me like long lost royalty, filling the tub with suds and then beckoning me in, where she washed each of my limbs in turn and polished my skin with her great soft sponge. After she had dried me off... she anointed me with Jergen's Lotion.... Then she reached for her dusting powder—Evening in Paris—and tickled me all over with the pale blue puff. When she had done, I knew I was precious. I was absolutely convinced that I was loved.”

This book of Ephesians, no matter who wrote it originally, is designed to remind us of that kind of love, which God has for each of us and all of us as a community of faith: love that is excessive, tender, and richly abundant.

Karen Chakoian points out, that in this letter, the writer wants to emphasize that we are blessed *in Christ*, chosen *in Christ*, destined for adoption *through Christ*. And it is *in Christ* that we have obtained our holy inheritance; and our hope is always set *on Christ*.

This opening passage of Ephesians sets down an alternative definition of personal worth. It's not so much that you and I are really so special somehow, but rather that through that faith we have entered into something extraordinary, offered like a gift to us, something that no one can every take away from us. We are like paupers who have been invited to take the place of princes... we have been invited to share in God's true riches, which are grace. God wants us to realize our worth in God's eyes so that we can live as God's own beloved children.

Have you ever known someone who lived through a hellish childhood, only to come out ok in the end? And have you ever asked that someone—or asked yourself, if *you* are that someone—why they think they survived, and even more, turned out reasonably normal and happy? I bet you that every one like that you ask will tell you the same thing: somebody in their life loved them and cared what happened to them. Somebody, somehow, made them aware of their worth.

Some children are not so lucky as to have a doting grandmother or even a concerned and involved teacher; but every child can have God, because there is not one child on earth who does not belong to God or who is not extravagantly loved by God. Our task is to see that all children—and adults, for that matter—know about that love, know how to access it, know how to claim it as their inheritance. It's little enough to do, since most of us have enjoyed that tender affection and the riches of God's grace—some of us, for our entire lives.

All this makes me wonder why the writer of Ephesians was piling on all these superlatives in this letter. Was the church of Ephesus in despair? Where they going through some difficult phase, or looking into the face of disaster? If so, then it appears that the opening to the letter is meant to cheer them up and reassure them of their worth as a congregation and their value as believers and children of God.

Our own beloved sister congregation, Fellowship in Christ Church of the Brethren, is right now going through a time when it would be easy to despair. All this spring, the remaining active members have tried to take a loving but realistic look at their situation as a formal existing congregation of their denomination. You may remember the time, oh, ten years ago or more, when a few leaders of that group came to visit Fremont Congregational and only after giving us a good looking over, decided to approach us as a possible home for worship and mission.

Fellowship in Christ has a long and memorable history as a bastion of the Church of the Brethren in the East Bay. Once located in Oakland, with a church building of their own, the congregation went through some very rough challenges, many due to their non-violent stance as a historic peace church. Eventually, the group got too small to justify keeping their building. They moved into rented space. Again, the road was not smooth for them, and the group got too small to maintain a pastor. Even then, leaders within the congregation stepped forward, which is traditional in Brethren churches and a quite acceptable way to provide pastoral leadership. But still they had trouble keeping things together and moving.

And so they lit on our doorstep, just a-lookin' for a home. When church leader Janice Fralin sat down with me to talk this whole thing over, I told her flat out, "You know, of course,

we are an Open and Affirming congregation.” I was relieved when Janice beamed and nodded vigorously. The Church of the Brethren are not usually known for their liberal ideas when it comes to issues like that. But Fellowship in Christ, as I’ve said before, has never been a typical congregation of the Brethren. It must be something in the water here in the Bay Area... but whatever made them the wonderful, accepting people they are, we have been happy to have them with us. Many of the congregation joined ours as Associate Members, and some have attended from time to time as friends; all the while maintaining their own denominational identity and meeting together once a month for “Brethren business.” They have, every one of them, brought something valuable and precious to our mutual life together.

Yet every good thing must come to an end, it seems, and Fellowship in Christ has made the very difficult but very courageous decision to disorganize as a congregation. Not to stop loving each other and caring about and for each other, but to say goodbye to the formalities of church hood. The funds from the long-ago sale of their church property have begun to run low—over the years they were used for many mission projects, educational opportunities, and participation in denominational events. Fellowship in Christ has pledged as a group to FCC’s budget in the past, and we have been humbly grateful for that support. With the closing of the congregation, any remaining funds will be forwarded to the Brethren office so that they can continue to support and build that particular family in Christ.

My hope is that our friends who remain with us at FCC—Esther, Gerald, Gayle, and Maren—understand in their deepest heart of hearts that they, and their legacy, are still worthy in the eyes of God. Wherever they roam they remain children of God, with every grace and blessing that is their inheritance. If they are suffering a touch of nostalgia for what once was, if they are feeling a little like princes who have now become paupers, we will understand... but as their brothers and sisters in Christ—something that will never change—I hope that we will continue to challenge them to look forward in hope and confidence, for there is still much work to be done in Christ’s name.

There is a mysterious and invisible seal that marks each one of us as members of the family of faith. That seal is our ticket into God’s party, the celebration where Jesus Christ is host and the Holy Spirit creates the atmosphere. Wherever the church praises God and confesses Christ; wherever the Spirit’s presence is acknowledged and appreciated—whether in historic church or simply where two or three are gathered in his name—we exist in glorious grace. And wherever brothers and sisters gather, there is opportunity to be found—chances to not just receive blessings, but to be them. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Holy and open-hearted God, in the ups and downs of life it sometimes seems as if there is no way for us to maintain our worth in your eyes. Things happen that we interpret as failures; we do fail in ways we don’t really understand and don’t know how to prevent. Our worth in our own estimation can rise and plunge, almost minute to minute. Help us, through Word and community, through fellowship, ritual, and prayer, to learn and to know that nothing can separate us from you, and nothing can diminish our intrinsic worth to you. When we sin, you are compassionate and merciful; when we are victorious, you applaud our successes; when we are down, you lift us up in so many ways; and when we are lost, you find us and lead us forth out of the wilderness and into a new and challenging and fearfully wonderful kingdom. Grant us always the blessings which we humbly acknowledge as your gifts. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

RESOURCES:

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