

Reading Ephesians is like walking through a great house that has been closed up for years and making it ready for new homeowners. Of special interest in this house are the windows, which are the words of Ephesians. All are dirty, and some are hard to open. We need to clean and repair them, so we can see the breath-taking beauty beyond and throw them open to allow the refreshing wind of the Spirit to blow through the house.

### Perspective

Let's look through the windows we have cleaned and repaired so far: **saints, spiritual blessings, heavenly realms, in Christ, chose, predestined, and grace**. Ephesians opens with a promise to the people of God: God **has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. The heavenly realms** are dangerous. It is the realm of **spiritual forces of evil** that make war against the Church and all human flourishing. They fragment. They betray. They kill. They can be resisted, but they can't be eradicated – not yet and not by us! But they are already subject to the authority of Christ. That's why the spiritual blessings God gives us are more than a match for the **spiritual forces of evil**.

The first blessing is the Church. Unlike **the spiritual forces of evil**, which degrade and destroy, God chose the Church to be holy and blameless sons of God. That makes the Church indispensable to the salvation of the world. The **powers of this dark world** and **the spiritual forces of evil** will not prevail against the Church. The Church is the most important community in the world.

We saw something else through our clean windows. The House of Ephesians is a house of love. Two phrases in verse five convey God's tenderness and intimacy with the Church. God predestined us **in love**. He predestined us **to be adopted as his sons**. Those actions were not a cold mandate handed down by an indifferent, distant Magistrate. God's tenderness and intimacy evoke the single greatest summary of the meaning of Christianity: **God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.** (John 3:16)

It has taken three weeks to make these windows clean enough to see through them. They were really dirty, and you ain't seen nothin' yet.

### Forgiveness

Let's get back to work in verse 7: **In him** (in Christ – where else!) **we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins**. This dual-pane window is like stained glass that is so dirty the sunlight can't shine through. The first pane of glass in the window is the word **redemption**.

Have you heard that word lately? I can't remember the last time I heard it outside the Bible. There's a problem. When a word drops out of everyday speech, people forget what it means or change its meaning. We still hear the word *redeem*. Here's an example from sports. After losing five games in a row, the Philadelphia Phillies redeemed themselves by winning a three-game series against the Atlanta Braves. It means they made up for a bad week of losing by having a good week of winning. That is not what Ephesians is talking about. What did Paul mean by **redemption**?

Paul was a Jew. He knew the Jewish Bible from stem to stern. The idea of **redemption**

that he learned from the Jewish Bible is clear in a passage like Exodus 6:6-7: **“I am the Lord and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them and redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.”** Redemption in the Bible means emancipation. It is the act that creates the people of God.

Then, Paul made a brilliant move. He used that Old Testament idea to explain Jesus Christ. He did in three words in verse 7. **In him we have redemption through his blood.** In a flash we are standing again at the foot of the cross on Good Friday. The apostle did not see the death of Christ as a tragedy or a travesty of justice. He saw it as the wisest and most powerful thing God ever did. It did for the Church what the Passover Lamb and the crossing of the Red Sea did for ancient Israel. It emancipated His followers and established them as the people of God, the Church.

If you begin to see this, then sunlight is shining through the stained glass once again, But we need to clean the other pane to see its full beauty. Redemption means emancipation. The death of Christ set us free and established us as the people of God. But I still don't get it. What are we set free from? The rest of verse 7 gives us the help we need. **In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.**

Forgiveness is also a very dirty windowpane. I'm afraid we are losing forgiveness as a category for understanding life. I base my concern on a change I see in what I read and what I hear in the way people talk to me when they seek my pastoral advice.

Nobody writes any more about guilt; they write about depression. People seldom talk to me about their feelings of guilt; they talk about their feelings of depression. It's not cool to feel guilty, because guilt acknowledges moral responsibility. I can give you examples of how we have taught two generations of students to exchange moral responsibility for therapy. Think of slogans we've all heard: “no-fault divorce,” “that's true for you but not true for me,” “pornography is in the eye of the beholder,” “alternative life-styles,” and “I have a right to happiness.” These slogans promise emancipation, but they require people to make life-changing decisions, who have neither time nor skill to make those decisions. The unintended, accumulating consequences of those decisions are devastating to people and to national life. No wonder people are depressed.

I'm not making a political point here. I am interpreting verse 7. The treatment for depression is drugs; the treatment for guilt is forgiveness. The exchange of guilt for depression blunts our felt need for forgiveness. It blunts our felt need for God. That degrades human life. It is the work of **the spiritual forces of evil.** (Ephesians 6:12)

The Church with its message of Good Friday and its confession of sins calls people to accept moral responsibility for their actions. I am not asking you to stop your medication for depression. I am not qualified to do that. You have to make that decision in consultation with your doctor. I am asking you what evil you may have failed to accept moral responsibility for. It might contribute to your depression. Ask your therapist to help you to talk about it. If your therapist dismisses it as unnecessary, I can refer you to other competent professionals, who think it may be very necessary. The Church offers you the spiritual blessing you need: the forgiveness of sins in Christ.

Let's clean this window a little more. The **forgiveness of sins** is not primarily about

making us feel better. It is about God. We read a powerful truth together last year. Romans 5:10 says: **When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son. Enemies of God** is strong language. It is distasteful, but is real. It means that if we let nature take its course, we would be happy to forget about God.

**Reconciled to God** is strong language. It is hopeful, and it is real. It means that the death of Christ restores our friendship with God. Forgiveness of our sins is the heart and soul of reconciliation with God. Forgiveness emancipates us from guilt and lies and estrangement from God and constitutes us as the people of God, the Church. That's redemption. That's the truth of Ephesians 1:7.

### **Christ the Unity of All Things**

Now that the window is clean, what do we see through it? First, God's emancipating forgiveness, says the rest of verse 7, is **in accordance with the riches of God's grace**. Grace means that God smiles on us. Did you ever have something good happen to you that you didn't expect, and you know you didn't deserve? That's how God's grace works.

Verse 8 goes on to say that God **lavished** his grace **on us with all wisdom and understanding**. Paul began to explain that in verse 9: **And he (God) made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ**. This is new, and it is a mystery. Paul says God had made it known to him and others. So, Paul, what can you tell us about this mystery? Don't keep us in suspense.

Verse 10 will only get us started, but it will be all we can handle today. First, verse 10 says that this mystery is **to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment**. That brings us to one of those exciting moments in Bible study when we have to make a decision. That means people will disagree. Someone is going to be right, and someone is going to be wrong. What is crucial in this disagreement is making your decision and sticking to it in love – love for Christ, love for the truth, love for your fellow believers, those who agree with you and those who disagree with you.

The decision is this: when Paul spoke about the times reaching their fulfillment, was he talking about the future, or was he talking about the present? Did Paul envision some golden age at the end of history, or did he think something decisive for all human history had already happened? I'll tell you my decision, and you'll have to decide if it has merit as we continue through Ephesians. I believe Paul meant that something decisive for all human history had already happened with Christ.

I believe Paul would say, "We have seen the future, and it is Jesus Christ." In His death and resurrection He has defeated the devil and all the spiritual forces of evil. He has defeated the last enemy, death. He has brought life and immortality to light. He has already set in motion processes by which the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of God. He has modeled for the Church patterns by which we can already participate in bringing this kingdom to earth."

The rest of verse 10 states in a brief and breath-taking way the mystery that Christ has set in motion. It is **to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ**. We hear a lot about the global economy. We talk about how technology is shrinking the world. We have a United Nations. We have a World Health Organization. We

have in International Monetary Fund. You can travel to every country on earth and find thousands of churches that believe what we believe here at BVBC.

Does it ever occur to you that behind these powerful, cross-cultural, international realities the Lord of all the earth, the Grand Chess Master, is preparing the world for the day when He **bring(s) all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ**? The unity of all things under Christ is “the one far off, divine event toward which the whole creation moves.”

The apostle is about to wax eloquent on this theme. What will shock us again is that he saw the Church as the harbinger of that coming unity under Christ. But that’s a story for another Sunday or two or three.

### **Take-aways**

Since Ephesians professes to offer wisdom in understanding the deeper currents that shape human life, I call on you one more week to read or listen to Ephesians all the way through, and as we read, let’s stop and praise God for things we read.

This week, I’d like to ask you to do something else: ask God to change your mind about the Church. Your estimate of the Church’s value is too low. The Church is indispensable to the salvation of the world. The **powers of this dark world** and **the spiritual forces of evil** will not prevail against the Church. The Church is the most important community in the world. Ask God to help you see the Church that way.