

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

II Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Mark 6:14-29; Ephesians 1:3-14.

II Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19 is about the domestication of Yahweh! That is, it is about how a political system uses religion as a way of bringing about conformity to its objectives and agenda.

The Old Testament lesson for today deals with King David's action to bring the Ark of the Covenant from its hiding place in Kiriath-jearim to his new capital city, Jerusalem where it was to be ensconced in the Temple he planned to build there.

The Ark of the Covenant was the wooden chest (later made most elaborate in gold with winged seraphim on its lid) that contained the tablets upon which were written the Ten Commandments (Num. 10-14). To the Israelites, it was much more than a box holding some special stones! It was to them an extension or embodiment of the presence of Yahweh (Num. 10:35-36; I Sam. 6:3, 5, 8, 20), a symbol of God's presence in Israel's midst to be particularly used to lead Israel into battle against a foe (I Sam. 4), as a symbol of the very covenant that made Israel into one nation of distinct tribes, centered around the Ten Commandments (Exod. 25:16, 21; I Kings 8:21; II Chr. 6:11), and as a portable throne for the invisible presence of God. So the ark of the covenant was a very powerful symbol to Israel of their very being as a nation under Yahweh and of that God's continued presence as their true monarch in their midst.

Once the ark was created and became the "ark" (or abode) "of the covenant" (i.e., the tablets of the Law), it led Israel through its wilderness wanderings (Num. 10, 14), and then led Israel into its conquest of Palestine (Josh. 3-10). Once the primary Canaanite strongholds had been taken, the ark was shared between the two primary sanctuaries of Israel – Shiloh and Bethel. In a battle against the newly invading "Sea People" (or Philistines) at Shiloh, the ark was captured by the Philistines as a war prize and taken to their city of Ashdod (I Sam. 4). From both the viewpoint of the Philistines and the Israelites, this capture didn't merely mean that Israel's enemies had taken an historic treasure. In a profound sense, they had "captured" Yahweh so that Israel was bereft of the protective power of their God.

But holding the Ark of the Covenant didn't work out for Philistia in the way it had hoped. Although possession of the ark normally brought its possessors good fortune (even for non-Israelites; cf. II Sam. 6:1), it spelled disaster for Philistia. They were visited with bubonic plague, faced economic disaster and experienced military defeat while holding the ark. Therefore, they decided to rid themselves of this curse. Placing the ark on a cart, they whipped the oxen to begin pulling the ark, and the oxen wandered away from Philistia with their sacred load (I Sam. 6:1—7:2). Eventually, they showed up at the farm of Abinadab in Kiriath-jearim, who brought it in to his house, dedicated one of his sons to be its priest, and there it remained for twenty years (before, during and after the reign of Saul). It is at this point that our Old Testament lesson for today picks up the tale.

David had secured his kingdom. He had been crowned by popular consent over both the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, merging them into one. He had taken the city of Jerusalem as his capital, making it into the political and economic center of the nation. He had eliminated the threat of Philistia, had reduced their holdings to the territory around a few cities on the

Mediterranean coast, and had annexed most of their nation, thus beginning to build an empire. Now it was time for David to consolidate his power by turning Jerusalem into a center for Yahweh worship as well as his political and economic capital. Thus, he decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant from Abinadab's farm to Jerusalem.

At this time in Israel's history, there was a dominant Yahwist tradition and a slowly emerging monarchical tradition. The Yahwist or wilderness tradition was one symbolized in the life and ministries of Moses, Joshua and the prophet Samuel. It was a tradition committed to the maintaining of twelve relatively independent tribes held together by a common commitment to Yahweh and to the covenant (as symbolized in the Ten Commandments) of how these tribes and its people should build their life together. That tradition was one of shared, charismatic leadership (that is, that God's "spirit" would fall upon a person and raise him to leadership), a Bedouin-like existence in the promised land and loyalty to a deity more at home in the desert than in the palace. This tradition is given plaintive voice when the people demand that the twelve tribes be combined under one king (i.e., Saul), and the judge Samuel seeks to dissuade them ("The king who reigns over you will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots, he will make you into an army of thousands, take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers, take the best of your fields and olive orchards, your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work" I Sam. 8:11-16). But God says to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them" (I Sam. 8:7).

The emerging tradition is the monarchical tradition. That was a tradition begun by King Saul, and then furthered by David, Solomon and the kings of the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah. This tradition embraced highly centralized authority, a hereditary leadership in which the new leader was the appointed son of the previous leader and might or might not be filled with "the spirit of Yahweh", and a monarchy-centered economic and political (and largely urban) world. Most importantly, this tradition structured its worship of God as much as it structured its political and economic life. God was served, not by each Israelite being obedient to God by seeking to "do justice, to do mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8), but by participating in the elaborate ceremony and rituals of the Temple. In a profound sense, this tradition sought to confine God to a Temple where he could be served by priests, rather than being at large in the land, served by the people in their efforts to act justly and proclaimed by prophets accountable to no king. Thus, the first tradition encouraged the equitable sharing of power by all, whereas the second tradition sought highly centralized and hierarchical control and domination by a predetermined few. The bringing up of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem was an integral step in making this second, monarchical tradition dominant in Israel.

The text tells us that the Ark of the Covenant was moved to Jerusalem in two stages. First, it was picked up at Abinadab's farm and placed on an oxen-pulled cart to be taken to Jerusalem. It was then taken in grand procession toward Jerusalem, led by King David himself who "danced before the Lord" (II Sam. 6:5). But the procession didn't make it to Jerusalem. When the cart hit a rut in the road, it swayed precipitously, and it looked like the ark would come crashing off the cart. One of Abinadab's sons accompanying the ark, put out his hand to steady the ark – and when he touched it, he immediately fell dead. That sobered the party instantly! The power of Yahweh that the second tradition was seeking to domesticate, had suddenly broken out of control! The

text tells us, “David was afraid of the Lord that day; he said, “How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?” So David was unwilling to take the ark of the Lord into the city of David” (6:9-10). So they took the ark to a nearby farmhouse instead, and left it in the care of Obed-edom the Gittite. And David returned alone to Jerusalem.

Three months passed, and David had a chance to think it all over. He decided that possessing the ark was worth the risk of an angry God. So he, his courtiers and his priests returned to the farm of Obed-edom, this time bore the ark as prescribed by the Law,¹ and made sacrifices every six paces to appease the wrath of God (they weren’t taking any chances). Thus, David and his entourage brought the ark into the city of David – Jerusalem.

The bringing of the ark into Jerusalem was more than the movement of a shrine. Remember that to the Israelites, the Ark of the Covenant connoted four things to Israel. It was (1) the embodiment of the presence of Yahweh, (2) a symbol of God’s presence in their midst, (3) a symbol of the covenant that bound them together as one nation and was (4) a portable throne for Yahweh himself. Thus, to bring the Ark of the Covenant into the city was to *bring Yahweh himself into the city*. Jerusalem had literally become the “city of God” (*Jerusalem*), as it was formerly the “city of Shalem” (*Jerusalem*). Thus, by bringing the ark into the city and then enabling it to become a continual presence in the city, David had turned the city from simply being the political capital and economic center of Israel into becoming its religious center, as well. Its king sat on its political and economic throne (the palace), and its God sat on its religious throne (the ark), ruling as one over God’s new empire!

Further, the ark’s arrival in Jerusalem enabled David to integrate these two distinct religious traditions in Israel. Rather than having the wilderness tradition and its prophets stand over against the monarchy and call it back to the vision of the wilderness, David had co-opted that tradition into the rapidly expanding monarchical tradition. What David had done by bringing the ark to Jerusalem with great celebration and festivity and by ensconcing it there as an integral part of Israel’s formal worship, he had effectively domesticated the wilderness tradition. He had made that tradition subject to the state rather than holding the state accountable to the tradition for its actions. And thus it is ever so. Every political, economic and even religious system seeks to domesticate its prophets in order to eliminate resistance and criticism and to build a power that dominates the people.

Psalm 24 is a “psalm of ascent”. In other words, it is a psalm that is to be sung as Israel’s priests and people process up to the Temple in a religious ceremony. It is a psalm that is well known to all readers of scripture. But what is particularly significant about it is that this psalm directly addresses the struggle between the wilderness and the monarchical traditions of Israel.

The psalm begins by proclaiming the wilderness tradition. “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers” (24:1-2). The whole earth, the Psalmist declares, is God’s temple. Therefore, God does not need a temple made with hands. The foundations of that authentic temple (the world) are the seas. The pillars of that temple are its trees and rivers. The Psalmist perceives the earth

¹ Not on a cart, but on the shoulders of priests through poles on either side of the ark.

as God's true temple floating upon the seas of chaos, its rivers and trees holding up the dome of the heavens (and the chaotic waters above the roof of the heavens). Walking this earth is to walk in God's authentic temple, as one sees the land – the earth literally – and its divisions into peoples and tribes and nations, filled with abundance of crops and fruits and the fecundity of its animals and people. It is not an empty, echo-filled temple but one that is lively and active and vital.

The psalmist then introduces the monarchical tradition and its center in the human-built temple in Jerusalem. The second temple, the one that was constructed by humans, is a microcosm of that larger earthy temple, God's handiwork in miniature (vss. 3-6). It pales in comparison to God's temple of the earth. But it is a means by which Israel can be particularly aware of the presence of God in their midst. So God condescends to enter this man-made temple and to occupy it (vss. 7-10). And because God so chooses to take up occupancy in this building made by human hands, he expects all those who also enter this temple to worship him to be of "clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully" (vs. 4). That is the company whom God receives in this, God's throne room!

Thus, the psalm ends by inviting God into this space dedicated and offered to him, and thus inviting all who would worship this God to enter that space in which God chooses to dwell. "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! That the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory" (vss. 9-10)!

Mark 6:14-29 is an introduction to and then the telling of the story of the execution of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas, king of Galilee. This story is inserted by Mark in the middle of the larger story of Jesus' rejection by his hometown, and the embrace of his disciples by those to whom they are ministering throughout Galilee (6:1-13; 30-32). That larger story tells us that the disciples had returned from their successful mission to the villages of Galilee (6:6b-13), and shared with Jesus that success (vs. 30). But inserted right in the very middle of that story of disciple success (in fact, even interrupting it) is the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. And one must ask, "Why did Mark, who is usually so careful in his editing of his gospel, interrupt that larger story with this particular story about John?"

The Gospel lesson for this Sunday in ordinary time divides into two parts. The first part deals with Herod's response to Jesus (6:14-16). Mark states that Jesus' ministry was gaining so much attention that it came to the attention of King Herod Antipas. Herod, seeking an explanation for the popularity and effectiveness of Jesus, declared, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised (from the dead)" (6:16). In other words, he believes that Jesus is actually John come back to life. That assertion betrays the guilty conscience Herod feels in his execution of John on a whim. Mark then moves on to tell us that story.

John the Baptist had repeatedly and outspokenly criticized Herod Antipas for living with and then marrying a woman named Herodias. Why did John level such criticism at the king? To understand the significance of this attack, one must know a little about Herod Antipas and Herodias.

Herod Antipas was one of three sons of Herod the Great who ruled Israel after Herod the Great's death. Herod the Great had ruled all of Palestine under the authority of Rome from 37 to 4 BCE. Upon his death, Rome divided his kingdom into three parts, assigning the parts to three of Herod's nine sons (the others had been killed by Herod as possible rivals to his throne). Archelaus became tetrarch² of Judah, Herod Antipas of Galilee and Herod Philip of Trachonitis (or Trans-Jordan, the Gentile states beyond the Jordan River). Archelaus proved to be unable to maintain order in the volatile atmosphere of Judah and was therefore unseated by Rome in 6 CE (A.D.); his kingdom was reduced to a Roman province directly under the authority of a Roman procurator assigned to govern the area, with internal political responsibilities being assigned to the Jewish priesthood, whose chief priest would be appointed by Rome. Antipas ruled Galilee from 4 BCE until 39 CE (Mt. 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Lk. 9:7-9; 13:31-33; 23:6-12), and Philip ruled Trans-Jordan from 4 BCE through 34 CE (Luke 3:1). Antipas was followed to his throne by Agrippa I (37-44 CE) (Acts 12:1-23) who was not his son, but the son of his brother Aristobulus (long deceased). After Agrippa's death, his son Agrippa II (53-100 CE) (Acts 25:1-27; 26) became tetrarch of Galilee. Herod Antipas had the reputation of being more Roman than Jewish. Although he participated in appropriate Jewish festivals, he was known as a dissolute, profligate and power-mad king.

Who, then, was Herodias? Herodias was a daughter of Herod the Great's older son, Aristobulus. Consequently, she was a generation younger than either of her future husbands, Philip or Antipas. She married Herod Philip, who was also one of Herod's sons (but of a different wife); thus Herodias was Philip's niece and half-sister once removed. She bore a daughter to Philip, whose name was Salome. Herodias was seduced away from Philip by Herod Antipas, and came with her daughter to live with him in an adulterous relationship. Antipas divorced his wife in order to marry Herodias, who was his half-sister, as well (both Philip and Antipas had the same mother and father). Antipas and Herodias were formally married in a Roman ceremony, even though there is no evidence that Herodias got a divorce from Philip. This, then, was the sordid relationship of which John the Baptist was so critical ((Mk. 6:18-19). To say "Herodias had a grudge against John, and wanted to kill him" (Mk. 6:19) is an extreme understatement! John's "speaking truth to power" would cost the prophet his head.

The story of John the Baptist's death is well known. Herod Antipas had earlier arrested John for his criticism of the king, and he was now in jail in Herod's palace. Antipas gave a birthday banquet for himself, and invited to it all his courtiers and leaders of Galilee. At this banquet, Herod invited his "daughter", Salome, to dance for his guests. Her dance must have been most seductive, and he offers her any gift she wants, "even to half of my kingdom". Salome consults with Herodias, who sees this as an ideal way to get rid of her continuing critic. So she instructs Salome to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter. That is the request she makes, Antipas reluctantly agrees to it, and the head of John the Baptist is then served to the guests as the last course of Herod's birthday banquet!

² A tetrarch, in the Roman Empire, was the native ruler of a conquered province of Rome; it was a position that was less than that of a king or even a subject king, with strong limitations and direct accountability to Rome. Technically, Herod Antipas and his successors were not kings, but tetrarchs. But they all insisted upon being called a "king", and that is reflected in the New Testament references to them.

Why did Mark tell this story? And why does he have it interrupt the story of the success of Jesus' disciples in their mission effort? Mark tells this story in order to demonstrate clearly to the church the degree to which those in power will abuse their power in order to maintain it, thus requiring Jesus' disciples to recognize what they are up against in working for the kingdom of God. This story of the death of John the Baptist is a stark example of the arbitrary and vicious abuse and misuse of unilateral power by the political system. What is particularly of note in this story is how Mark has nuanced it. It was not only that a king would do whatever he needs to do to stay on the throne; it is not only a calculating, systematic, intentional use of power. In this case, it is the very opposite of calculation. Herod's decision to kill one of Israel's greatest prophets was made so that he would not "lose face" before his guests nor disappoint his daughter. Human life was bartered for royal face! Thus, Mark is reminding the followers of Jesus, "You may negotiate with political leaders; you may confront them; you may call them to accountability; you may even get agreement on their part to what you demand. But the fact is that they always remain a "snake in the grass", capable of and easily provoked into acting unilaterally, arbitrarily and even viciously to "chop off your head".

Now we understand why Mark placed this story in the midst of the disciples' triumphant return to Jesus after their successful mission. It is a reminder to them that the destiny of those who call humanity to repent, who heal the sick and liberate the poor, and call humanity to embrace another kingdom ("the shalom community") is always the same. You may be celebrating and cheering your triumphant ministry today. But the possibility always looms before you that, because of the very gospel you proclaim, the political, economic and even religious systems that you will come up against and call to accountability will seek to eliminate you – whether it is through a face-saving beheading or through a calculated crucifixion! The price of faithfulness to Christ and His Kingdom is rejection by those who dominate the power of this world.

Ephesians 1:3-14 is the first of seven selections from this book that appear in the lectionary for Ordinary Time. Because Ephesians is one of the most important books in the Pauline corpus and the one that most treats of the church's role in public life, we need to present an introduction to this book as well as an exposition of Eph. 1:3-14.

Introduction to Ephesians:

Suppose you were told the day and hour of your death, and there was no way you could get that changed – and that day and hour was only a few months away? What would you want to say to those closest to you – those whom you had most influenced? What would you want them to remember as your last words to carry with them for the remainder of their lives?

Now, suppose you were one of the two most influential leaders of a movement that seemed to threaten the nation of which you were a part, and that you knew the day and hour of your death because you had been found guilty of the crime of treason against that state, and that your execution on that date and hour had been set by that nation's judiciary? How would that affect what you might want to say?

Now, suppose not only were you going to be executed but also the other powerful leader of your movement was also to be executed, and you knew that the execution of both of you was going to initiate an immense persecution of the adherents to your movement, so that every believer would be in critical danger of also being executed. Now, what would you want to say?

That was exactly the situation that faced Paul the Apostle. Rome had sentenced both he and Peter, the head of the church, to death on the crime of treason (that is, both men refused to worship Caesar as God, a treasonous act against the state). Paul knew that their deaths would not end Rome's fury, but would rather signal the beginning of an immense persecution of the church that was designed to wipe it from the face of the earth.

Faced with this reality, Paul wrote a letter³ that was designed to be his "last will and testament", a letter containing the final things he wanted to say to his followers and the churches he had founded throughout the Roman Empire. That letter was designed to go to all of Paul's churches to present them with both the theology and the practical advice necessary to help them to survive the immense persecution Paul knew would come upon them from Rome. Two centuries later, that letter would mistakenly be given the name "Ephesians", and thus it is known to this day. But it was Paul's "last will and testament" to all of Paul's churches, and so it circulated to all those churches soon after Paul's execution at the hands of Rome.

³ Debate by biblical critics surrounds the book of Ephesians regarding its origins and authorship. Some suggest it was not written to the church in Ephesus, since most early manuscripts omit the words "in Ephesus" from the greeting in 1:1 ("to the saints in Ephesus"). Some have suggested that the letter was intended as an encyclical, summarizing Paul's theology and was meant either to be circulated among all his churches or even to be the introductory book in a collection of Paul's epistles following his death [cf. Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation and Commentary: The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), Vol. I, pp. 53-59; E.G. Beare, "Ephesians: A Critical Commentary", *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953); Bonnie Thurston, "Ephesians", *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), pp. 2089-2098].

Although most biblical critics date Ephesians as one of the last letters written by Paul or one of the earliest Pauline letters written after Paul's death (see the following paragraph), cases have been made for Colossians, Philippians or I and II Timothy as being Paul's final letters. The evidence for claiming Colossians or Philippians as Paul's "last will and testament" are relatively weak and are rejected by most biblical scholars. The case is particularly strong that the pastoral letters (I and II Timothy and Titus) were written well after Paul's death and are more in the tradition of Paul than written by Paul himself. For further study, see Ernest F. Scott, "Introduction and Exegesis of the Epistle to the Philippians"; Francis W. Bearer, "Introduction and Exegesis of the Epistle to the Colossians"; Fred D. Gealy, "Introduction and Exegesis of I and II Timothy and Titus", *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955); A.H. McNeile, *An Introduction to the Study of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 158-200.

There is also debate over the authorship of Ephesians. Some contend that it was written by Paul; others suggest it was written by a disciple of Paul's following his death. Arguments against Pauline authorship center around the significant differences between the writing style used in Ephesians and Paul's writing style in his other letters. That argument is countered with the observation that the purpose of Ephesians is profoundly different than any of Paul's unquestionably authentic letters, in that in Ephesians he was writing an essay (as opposed to a letter) not to a single church but to all his churches, attempting to present a comprehensive statement of his theology that he wanted to continue being held by the church after his death. It is my opinion that there is insufficient evidence to embrace the arguments of non-Pauline authorship of Ephesians. Therefore, throughout the seven weeks of this lectionary study of Ephesians, I will refer to Paul as the author of Ephesians. I perceive his purpose in writing this essay to be that of building the essential (Pauline) theology that would enable his churches not only to survive the coming Roman persecution, but to engage the Roman Empire in a struggle for the control of the minds, hearts and souls both of the people and of the systems of the Roman world.

It has often been suggested by biblical scholars that Paul's Letter to the Roman Church is the prince of all Paul's letters. That assertion is made because in Romans, Paul most clearly presents his doctrine of grace – that through the atoning, sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, God has already chosen us and done all that is necessary for our salvation and for our transformation into children of God. All we need do to become aware that we are so redeemed, Romans suggests, is to accept what God has already done for us – to accept that we are already accepted through Christ and made God's new creation. This was one of Paul's most profound insights, and it has made a dynamic faith possible for everyone who calls themselves, "Christian".

The book of Ephesians is built directly upon the theology of Romans. In Ephesians, Paul assumes the theological premise of Romans – that through Christ, God has done everything that is necessary to make and keep us right with God. In Ephesians, however, Paul takes that concept one step further. He applies that insight of the grace of God, not just to the individual (as he does in Romans), but also to the church as Christ's body. What is the God-driven and grace-filled walk that God's redeemed people are to take in an evil and God-denying world?

The two essential questions of Ephesians are these: "Who are all those people who, together have embraced this saving work of God through Christ?" And "what are these people called to be and do as God's people in a world that is not only unreceptive to them, but is hostile to them and wishes to eliminate them and their beliefs?"

In other words, what Christians faced 21 centuries ago in a hostile Roman Empire whose leaders wanted to rid themselves of Christianity and its demands, is exactly what we face today! Paul wrote Ephesians in order to prepare his churches for the Roman holocaust that was about to descend upon them once they had been deprived of their two primary leaders. But that is a message for us, as well. For we face a secular holocaust that, if it had its way, would either wipe us and our beliefs from the earth or would at least reduce us to an irrelevant niche in society where we could do no harm! So I believe there is no more important study for Christians today than to study Ephesians. The book of Ephesians will teach us how not to retreat in the face of such hostility, but instead to learn to use the power at our disposal to turn even the 21st century world upside down!

Ephesians 1:3-14:

In its Greek original, Ephesians 1:3-14 is one long sentence! Consequently, it is a single thought meant to introduce this entire letter. In other words, Ephesians 1:3-14 is the "executive summary" of this essay, in which Paul tells us what it is he is going to tell us more thoroughly throughout his letter.

In this section, Paul reviews what it is that God has done for us. He does so in a most succinct manner (even though it is all one lengthy sentence). Further, he then states why it is that God has done what he has done for us. Let's look at that list.

- ? God "*blessed* us in Christ with every spiritual blessing" (1:3)
- ? He "*chose* us before the foundation of the world" (1:4)

- ? He “*adopted* (us) as his children through Jesus Christ” (1:5)
- ? He “*redeemed*” and “*forgave*” us through Christ’s redemptive work (vss. 7-8)
- ? He has “*made known to us* the mystery of *his will*” (i.e., what we are called to do as God’s people) (1:9)
- ? He has “*marked (us) with* the seal of *his Holy Spirit*” (1:13).

Thus, Paul is telling us that everyone of us as Christians and all of us as the Body of Christ have been blessed, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, have come to know God’s will and are marked with the Holy Spirit! All of this God has given to us through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But precisely what does Paul mean by these words? Let’s look at each of them.

First, God has “*blessed us* in Christ with every spiritual blessing” (1:3). The Greek language has two words that are translated by our one English word “bless”. But in reality, each of these Greek words has its own unique nuance. *Eulogeo* means “to speak well of”. *Makarios* means “happy”. The word used here in 1:3 is *eulogeo*.

This word is rarely used by Paul – in fact, in only four other passages besides Ephesians 1:3. In Romans 12:14, the apostle writes, “Bless (*eulogeo*) those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them”. In I Cor. 4:11-13, he writes, “To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless. When reviled, we bless (*eulogeo*); when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly”. Speaking of the Last Supper, Paul writes in I Cor. 10:16, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?” And in Gal. 3:9-10, he writes, “Those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse.”

The way that Paul chooses to use *eulogeo* throughout his letters all have to do with suffering or with sacrifice. The common concept of blessing or of “speaking well of” another is the thought that there is cost involved when we are a blessing to others. Thus, it cost God to “bless us in Christ with every spiritual blessing”, and that cost will be revealed later on by Paul in this extended sentence in the suffering and death of God’s own son. That is what it means for us to be “blessed” by God.

“*Chosen*” is the next word used to describe what God has done for us. God has “chosen us before the foundation of the world” (1:4). The word “chose” is another word rarely used by Paul⁴ – in fact, it is used by him in only one other scripture, I Corinthians 1:26-29 – but there, its use is magnificent.

“Consider your own call, brothers and sisters,” Paul writes in I Cor. 1:26-29. “Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

⁴ It should be noted that although Paul rarely used the word “chosen”, he presented the concept of God’s choice of us as an integral part of his theology (cf. Rom. 8:29-33; 9:6-26; 11:5-28; 16:13; Col. 3:12; I Thess.1:4; II Thess. 2:13; Titus 1:1, for example).

God doesn't pursue the "brightest and the best", Paul says. He goes after ordinary people – folk who may not be politically powerful, who may not have great wealth, who may be seen as foolish, weak and of the lowest possible castes. But God chooses these people to glorify God in the world by the ways they choose to live and act with integrity. God selects "ordinary" people so that God might adopt, redeem, forgive and then use them. In this way, God makes clear that, when those people faithfully use power and money and leverage wisely to bring about change, it isn't because they are so clever, but because God is working in and through them!

Paul writes in our Epistle lesson for today, "(God) chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love" (1:4). The apostle is stating that God chooses people for a relationship with Himself. It is not so much that we choose God as it is that God chooses us! And God chooses us, not because there is anything particularly lovable or desirable about us (we are all miserable sinners), but because of Christ's sacrificial work for us (more on that later). That choice of us is "before the foundation of the world", and we are chosen so that we can be "holy (that is, set apart and dedicated) and blameless before him in love". That is, one is chosen, not because she is chosen, but because God has intentions for her that will be acted out in and through her life.

"Adopted" is the third work God has done for us Christians. Adoption is a term used a great deal by Paul. For example, in Rom. 9:4-5, he speaks of the Jews and writes, "To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all."

But Paul also develops the idea that Gentile Christians are also adopted by God. Writing to Roman Christians, he states, "you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption" (8:15). And to the Gentile Christians of Galatia, he writes, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children" (Gal. 4:4-5).

Paul faced a dilemma in his theology of grace. That dilemma was caused by the belief of the Jewish people – including Jewish Christians – that Israel had been chosen by God and therefore were the natural children of God. But if you believed that, then *ipso facto*, Gentiles were not and could not become children of God. Paul solved that conundrum by positing his doctrine of adoption. That is, although one must grant that Gentiles are not "natural" children of God, because of Christ's sacrifice for them, they are "adopted" by God into God's family. They are not natural children, but they are "adopted" children, and therefore receive all the privileges and rights of being as much a part of God's household as are God's natural children – the Jews.

In Ephesians 1:5, therefore, Paul writes, "(God) destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will". In other words, he is saying that Christians are children of God – whether they are formerly pagan Gentiles, Gentiles who converted to Judaism or are Jews. All Christians are children of God, because God has acted to adopt us into his family. We didn't become part of God's family because we were born to God. We are part of God's family, because God chose to choose us and to adopt us into his family.

And this God did, not because we are such “beautiful babies”, but because of Christ’s sacrificial death for us.

Further, God has “*redeemed*” and “*forgiven*” us. Paul writes, “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” (1:7).

Paul states that in the atoning death of Christ, God both “redeemed” us and “forgave” us. These are two very distinct and unique concepts, even though they are combined into the same phrase. But we often get redemption and forgiveness confused. It is important to differentiate between the two.

Our *redemption*, Paul states, occurs “through (Christ’s) blood”. In other words, Paul is stating that it took the death of Jesus Christ to provide for our redemption. Nothing else would make us right with God. To both the Jewish people and to the Gentiles of Paul’s day, sacrifice was necessary for redemption. Both within the Jewish sacrificial system acted out daily at their Temple in Jerusalem and in every Gentile temple, animals and birds were sacrificed to appease the deity and blood was shed so that sins might be atoned. *Everyone at that time, whether Jew or Gentile, believed that “without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness”* (Heb. 9:22). Therefore, Paul is stating, what God has done for us through the sacrificial death of Christ upon the cross is that God has provided for our redemption.

Forgiveness is something entirely different, Paul suggests. Whereas redemption was an action of God that happened at the cross of Christ (Jesus died for us, once and for all), forgiveness is something that happens right now and continues to happen. In redemption, Christ’s blood was shed at a particular point of time and in a particular place to make possible our salvation. But our trespasses must be forgiven, and that can happen only through forgiveness. God’s act of forgiveness is brought about through “the riches of God’s grace that is lavished on us” (that is, that because God has already chosen us in him, he move us relentless and even inevitably toward our asking for forgiveness). But forgiveness is the “here-and-now” action of asking and receiving what God promises God will provide if we but ask for it.

Both redemption and forgiveness are necessary for us to be freed from the bondage of sin, and our salvation hasn’t occurred until both redemption and forgiveness have taken place. That is why Paul includes both in this single statement of what God has done for us. Thus, he is telling us that we who are Christians – whether Jew or Gentile -- are already chosen by God from “before the foundation of the world”, we have been redeemed and forgiven, and thus our adoption into the household of God has been made complete by that transformation that God has wrought within us through Jesus Christ.

Paul then states, that “*God has made known to us the mystery of his will*, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time” (1:9-10a). What Paul is stating here is that God has a marvelous plan for both the Body of Christ and each individual within it. Thus, God has a marvelous plan for your life, which he activated by blessing, choosing, adopting, redeeming and forgiving you.

Paul will develop this idea much more fully in this “letter to the Ephesians”. But at this point, he is “setting the reader up” by introducing the idea that God has a will for us that may presently be a mystery to us but which God will make clear as we faithfully live, step-by-step, into his calling both as God’s people and as God’s person.

Finally, Paul concludes his list of what God has done for us by declaring, “You were *marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit*; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory” (1:13-14).

The words, “marked with the seal”, was apparently a baptismal formula used by the early church. A seal was an integral part of the security and legal process of the Roman Empire. Any political, economic or religious official within the Roman Empire and its member states was given a “seal” by the Roman government, and that seal was unique to him. That seal was his alone (comparable to our social security number) and stayed on his person (usually as a signet ring or hung around his neck). Any official or public document authored by this person would be stamped with his seal, using a large drop of wax. That seal would adhere the document so that it could not be easily opened, and confirmed the origin and ownership of that document and its contents as having originated from that owner. Thus, a sealed document from Publius Flavius that might be delivered to you told you – even before you opened it – that this was a document directly and personally sent to you from Publius Flavis and that its contents were both guaranteed as originating from him and would be unknown to the one delivering it. If the seal were broken, of course, this would tell you that security had been breached, and you would react accordingly.

As a newly confessed Christian, it would be appropriate for you to recognize God’s work in your life by being baptized. That baptism was the “seal”, the guarantee, the secure stamp or sign upon your life that you had, indeed, been blessed, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, and called by God to live into his plan for your life. And so baptized, the early Christians believed, the “promised Holy Spirit” would fall upon you as he fell upon Jesus at his baptism. Thus, by participating in the act of baptism and believing in the descent of the Spirit upon the initiate, the entire Christian community would acknowledge God’s work that had been done and was continuing to be done in you, and would welcome you into its community with arms of love!

But now comes the truly important question to Paul. Why has God done this work in each of us and in all of us as Christians? Why has God blessed, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, called, baptized and filled us with God’s Spirit? This introduction to the book of Ephesians now reaches its apex of intention. God has done this great work within each of us and all of us, Paul writes, so that we, as God’s adopted family, might participate in God’s “plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:10), so that we “might live for the praise of his glory” (1:12).

The key to understanding what would otherwise be a rather ambiguous statement is Paul’s use of the phrase, “things in heaven and things on earth”. We are to be integral players in bringing about God’s plan for the inauguration of God’s kingdom, both “in heaven and on earth”, Paul writes. But what does he mean by that?

In the first-century Roman Empire, Jews and Gentiles alike perceived the world in a far more complex way than we do. They saw the world as including heaven, hell and the earth, with very permeable divisions between them. In other words, they didn't see the world as essentially materialistic, with events happening through cause-and-effect or illnesses caused by germs. Rather, they saw the spiritual and material as being constantly mixed.

Thus, they believed that the spirit world (heaven, hell) and the physical world (earth) as being closely linked, with activities and actions occurring in the spirit world inevitably ordaining what was to take place on the earth ("Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"). Thus, Paul taught that Christ will inevitably reign over all the affairs of the earth. And how do we know that will happen? Simply because he already reigns with God the Creator in heaven (Eph. 1:20-21).

Thus, as a first century person, Paul's theology of "the principalities and powers" is built on the premise that what happens in the spirit world has its counterpart on earth, and what happens on earth impacts heaven. Therefore, the principalities and powers are, at one and the same time, both spiritual and earthly, *with the spiritual dimension of that power providing the spiritual dimension and power of any earthly system.*

The specific formula Paul uses to describe this phenomenon is that of "thrones, dominions, principalities and powers" (Col. 1:15-16; Eph. 1:20-21). But what is a throne, dominion, principality or power? A *throne* is the symbolic institution of power in a state, city, economic or religious institution, whether in heaven, hell or earth (thus Caesar, Caiaphas and God all sit upon their respective "thrones"). A *dominion* is the sphere of influence or territory ruled by that throne. A *principality* or prince is the specific person who currently occupies that throne (princes can change; thrones continue – "The king is dead; long live the king"). The *powers* or "authority" are the sanctions or rules that legitimize the "throne's" rule over that "dominion" and the "principality's" rights, privileges, obligations and limitations in exercising his prerogatives upon that throne.

Thus, when one asks, "What did Paul have in mind when he referred to "thrones, dominions, principalities and powers"? Did he mean spiritual warfare between God and Satan? Or was he describing the struggle between nations here on earth?", the answer to that question is "Yes"! Paul was describing both phenomena at the same time. Paul believed that every political, economic and religious institution here on earth was a battleground, not just between the people who held power or sought power in that system, or between that system and the comparable system of another nation. It was a battleground between the forces of God and the forces of Satan for dominance. Thus, every political or economic or religious struggle was not just a struggle between those in power and those seeking power. It was at its most profound depth a spiritual struggle between the forces of darkness seeking dominance, power and greed and the powers of God seeking justice, a sharing of wealth and godly relationships of shalom.

Therefore, if you are to truly understand the book of Ephesians, you must understand that every reference in Ephesians to "principalities and powers" or "heaven and earth" is a reference both

*to the Roman Empire and to the dark spiritual forces controlling and shaping and driving the Roman Empire.*⁵

Returning now to Ephesians 1:10, we need to state that Paul's reference to "(God's) plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" is not rhetoric to Paul. It is his code for the political, economic and religious institutions of earth – and especially of Rome – and their matching "principalities and powers" in the heavens (cf. Col. 1:15-16).

Since Paul means here the systems of the government, of the marketplace and of religion, what is he saying that the church is called to do? What he is stating is that the church is to be active in participating on the side of God in challenging the systems here on earth, even as the angels wage comparable war in the heavens. What Paul is declaring is that ***the church is to be involved in public life as its essential mission!***

Involvement in public life is what the church is to primarily and essentially be about. Paul is not suggesting that our involvement in public life is optional or tangential to the purpose, work and life of the church. It is the essential job of the church! That is why we exist. And that is why we are blessed, called, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven and granted the power of the Holy Spirit – so that we can be the kind of people God caused us to be in working for the transformation of our world's political, economic and religious systems into systems more like those of heaven – the just, equitable and relational community of shalom that God created us all to be. To settle for anything less as our essential mission is for us to be disobedient and unfaithful to God's call and choice of us!

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⁵ The biblical scholar who has done the most exhaustive and scholarly study of first-century Gentile and Jewish thinking regarding "principalities and powers" is Walter Wink, Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary, New York City. His work is universally recognized by both conservative and liberal biblical critics as the most formative in the field. Wink's research is best presented in his ground-breaking trilogy, *The Powers*, cf. *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984), *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Minn.: Fortress Press, 1986); *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minn.: Fortress Press, 1992).