**The Church in the Power of the Spirit**

**May 21, 2017**

**“The Spirit is God’s Guarantee”**

**1. Introduction: God is Great, God is Good**

A couple of weeks ago I started another session of teaching New Testament Greek at Tyndale’s summer school. I have taught Greek every summer for the past 11 years and I don’t tire of it – I could do it ‘til the day that I die. Although my students may get discouraged at the amount of work it takes to learn a language, I love the study of New Testament Greek. Last week I was chatting with Anya over breakfast about work, school, and church and I commented that the highlight of my day is to read and study the Greek text in preparation for sermon writing. For me, translating the Greek New Testament is an act of worship.

I also took biblical Hebrew when I did my MDiv many years ago and I had to do one semester of Hebrew when I began doctoral studies. I loved translating the Hebrew Bible as well. One of my favorite courses in my first year of graduate studies was a course on the Psalms. On a weekly basis the members of the class sit in a circle, read, and translate the Hebrew text of the Psalms. Although I often struggled to pronounce the Hebrew correctly, I thoroughly enjoyed translating the Psalms. In one of those classes our professor, Michael Kolarchik, said something that I have never forgotten. He stated that the key theme of the Psalms and all of Scripture is “God is great; God is good.” The Psalm that we had to memorize and recite in Hebrew, Psalm 117, nicely illustrates this key idea.

Praise the Lord, all you nations,

Praise him, all you people of the earth.

For he loves us with unfailing love,

The Lord’s faithfulness endures forever.

Praise the Lord!

God is so *great* that he is worthy of the praises of all the nations of the earth. Yet God is *good* in that he shows his unfailing love and faithfulness toward the people of the earth.

One of the first prayers that I learned as a child was the popular mealtime prayer, “God is great; God is good. Let us thank him for our food, Amen.” Its simplicity should not undermine its profound truth about God. *God is great; God is good* isthe central theme of this morning’s Epistle lesson, Ephesians 1:3-14. After Paul gets through the formalities of an ancient letter, he launches into one long, 202-word sentence in the Greek text. In the words of one commentator it is like “a snowball tumbling down a hill, picking up volume as it descends” (Stott, *The Message of Ephesians,* p. 32). This long sentence is a challenge to translate from Greek to English, but I am inspired by it. I think Paul, captured by the awesome wonder of God’s grace, was carried away and “his speech pours out of his mouth in a continuous cascade” (Stott, p. 32). Paul was caught up in an act of worship and the words just poured out.

At its heart, this passage is all about *worship*. It begins with the words, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3), reflecting the *berakah* prayers of Judaism. “Blessed be God,” is a declaration of praise and adoration to God. “God is blessed when He is praised for all that He freely bestows on man and on His world” (Foulkes, *Ephesians,* p. 45). The way to bless God is to rehearse, to proclaim the blessings we have received from God’s hand. Paul does just this as he reminds his readers that God is “the one who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (1:3). The remainder of the passage lists these manifold spiritual blessings in Christ. At the conclusion of the passage, Paul reminds us that all of this is “to the praise of his (God’s) glory” (1:14). Our response to God’s blessing is *worship.* God is great; God is good, let us praise him!

**2. God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ**

Paul is calling us to give praise to God by declaring that he has blessed us in Christ with *every spiritual blessing* (1:3).Right from the start, the passage takes on a clear *Trinitarian* focus upon the Father, the Son and the Spirit in regard to these blessings. This verse affirms “every blessing of the Holy Spirit has been given to us by the Father, if we are in the Son” (Stott, *The Message of Ephesians,* p. 35). God, the Father is the *origin* of these blessings as he *blesses us* with them. Christ, the Son is the *sphere* of these blessings since we experience them when we are *in him.* Finally, the *nature* of these blessings is connected with the Holy Spirit because they are *spiritual blessings.* Charles Hodge explains, “These blessings are spiritual not merely because they pertain to the soul, but because they are derived from the Holy Spirit, whose presence and influence are the great blessing purchased by Christ (Hodge, *Ephesians,* p 28).

As the passage unfolds this *Trinitarian* pattern continues as the threefold role of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in these blessings is explained. In a nutshell, this passage is saying that the Father *elects* and *chooses* us; the Son *redeems* us; and the Spirit *seals* us*.* While the focus in this morning’s reflections will be upon the Spirit, specifically, verses 13 to 14 of the passage, it may be edifying to summarize briefly these *spiritual* blessings, which Paul records here:

• God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless in love (1:4)

• God decided in advance to adopt us into his family (1:5)

• In Christ we are redeemed and forgiven (1:7)

• God has revealed to us his plan to gather up all things in Christ (1:9-10)

• In Christ we have received an inheritance (1:11)

• In Christ we are enabled to live for God’s glory (1:12)

• In Christ we were sealed with the Holy Spirit (1:13-14)

God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him. God predestined us to be adopted as his sons and daughters. The great God of the universe showed his goodness by choosing you and me before creation. God has freely given his grace to us in Christ Jesus, who gave his life and shed his blood for our freedom and forgiveness. Christ the Son humbled himself and became a servant so that we could be liberated from bondage to sin. God has an active and ongoing plan for all creation and he has revealed it to us and has made us a part of its outworking. The God of all creation is in the business of bringing things together in Christ. This grand design for cosmic reconciliation is illustrated by the cross – it is vertical, reconciling people to God and it is horizontal, reconciling people to people. Look around this church and you will see a group of diverse people, brought together because of Christ. We are foretaste and a beacon to all creation of his reconciling power. God’s is still at work as he puts the final touches on his great masterpiece, but we have no doubt that it will be fully completed one day. In the meantime, God has identified us as his own by sealing us with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the God’s guarantee that he will do what he has promised and fully redeem us as his own.

The God of all creation has reached down to us with abundant grace, love, forgiveness, reconciliation and promise. What shall be our response? Throughout this passage we read the constant refrain is “to the praise of his glorious grace” (1:6) or “to the praise of his glory” (1:12, 14) or as our translation says, “He did this so we would praise and glorify him” (1:14). As we reflect on these spiritual blessings, let us give praise and glory to God for his glorious grace. God is great, God good. Let us praise him!

**3. The Gift of the Spirit: God’s Seal and Guarantee**

As Paul’s description of God’s spiritual blessings draws to a close, he specifically mentions the gift of the Holy Spirit. He writes, “And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago.The Spirit is God’s guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people” (1:13-14). This translation from our pew Bibles nicely conveys the meaning of the passage, but no translation is perfect. The phrase, “he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago” can also be rendered, “you were *sealed* with the Holy Spirit of *promise*.”

The image of marking something with a *seal* is rich in meaning. In the ancient world to mark something with *a* *seal* had these *three* purposes:

• to authenticate or to confirm as genuine

• to mark as one’s property

• to make secure

So, the pew Bible’s translation, “he identified you as his own,” while accurate, does not convey the full nuances of the *seal.* Charles Hodge writes, “In all these senses believers are sealed. They are authenticated as the true children of God. They are thus assured of their reconciliation and acceptance. They are, moreover, marked as belonging to God; that is, they show other people, by the seal impressed on them, that they are God’s chosen ones. And, thirdly, they are sealed for salvation; i.e., they are certain of being saved. The sealing of God secures their safety. Thus believers were “sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30)” (Hodge, *Ephesians,* p. 48).

So, the next time that you doubt your standing before God, reflect on this truth - God has marked you with the seal of his Spirit. You are a genuine child of God; you belong to God; and you are in his safe hands until the end of time. This is the confidence that we have as followers of Jesus, not that we can pull up our own bootstraps and live for God, but that God’s Spirit in our lives is the undeniable mark of God’s work in and for us (Foulkes, *Ephesians,* p. 56).

Being sealed by God with his Spirit is something that happens at the beginning of our Christian life. Paul writes, “In him you also, when you had *heard* the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had *believed* in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit” (1:13). Although this passage speaks of God choosing people, there is still a great need for evangelism and faith. People need to hear the truth, the gospel of salvation, and so our task of proclamation is vitally important. At the same time, as the good news is spoken, people are challenged to respond to the message. Some will reject the gospel, yet others will take the path of faith and believe in Jesus. In that first moment of belief, God marks his redeemed and reconciled children with the Holy Spirit, giving them the assurance that he is active in their lives.

In this verse the Spirit is described as the *Holy Spirit of promise.* On the one hand, the gift of the Holy Spirit was promised by God in the Old Testament (Ezekiel 36:26, 37:1-14; Joel 2:28) and by Jesus (Luke 24:49; John 14-16; Acts 1:4). At the same time, the presence of the Spirit carries the promise of good things to come. Although, these spiritual blessings are realized in the present, we have not yet experienced the fullness of all these blessings. The Holy Spirit of *promise* assures us of the glorious future that God has for us.

Paul picks up on the present-future dimension of the gift of the Spirit when he describes the Spirit as “God’s *guarantee* that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people” (1:14). The Greek word (*arrabon*), translated as *guarantee* here, can also be translated as *down payment, first instalment,* or *deposit.* This was a commercial and a legal word that signified a down payment or a first instalment “that pays a part of the purchase price in advance, and so secures a legal claim to the article in question, or makes a contract valid” (Bauer’s Lexicon). So, God’s gift of the Holy Spirit is being compared to a down payment on a house. A down payment is both a guarantee of future payment and a first instalment of the purchase price. “So it is with the Holy Spirit. In giving him to us, God is not just promising us our final inheritance, but actually giving us a foretaste of it, which ‘is only a small fraction of the future endowment” (Stott, *The Message of Ephesians,* p. 49).

In a similar way, when we buy a house we put a down payment on it. Even though we own a fraction of the house and the bank owns the rest, we can still move in, redecorate, live in it and enjoy it. We can even tell our family and friends that we own a house. Over time, we slowly make those mortgage payments until the day when it is paid in full and the house is completely ours. In the same way, the present experience of the Holy Spirit in our lives is a guarantee and a foretaste of what we will experience in the future. Presently, the Spirit confirms that we belong to God and breathes God’s life into us, yet we look forward to future when we will be fully redeemed as God’s people.

**4. The Church in the Power of the Spirit**

One of the most important theologians of the 20th century is Jürgen Moltmann. He is a German Lutheran theologian so his works are thought provoking and weighty, not the stuff you’d read on a lazy Sunday afternoon sipping ice-tea in the backyard. His most important works include *Theology of Hope, The Crucified God* and *The Church in the Power of the Spirit.* In *The Church in the Power of the Spirit,* Moltmann speaks of the present-future dimension of the gift of the Spirit, a key idea in this passage from Ephesians. In a challenging section of the book, he defines the Holy Spirit as the power of the future that breaks into the present. “For through the Spirit the believer is determined by the divine future. The powers of the Spirit are the powers of life, which determine the present, extending their influence forward from the future of the new life. The fruit of the Spirit is the advance payment in joy of future blessedness, in spite of the experience of suffering; it is the advance payment in love, in spite of the experience of disappointment and hate.” Through the work and the indwelling of the Spirit, “the future that is hoped for enters into history” (p. 34).

The challenges facing our little church are similar to many other Christian churches around the world that struggle to define their identity and mission. It’s easy to get discouraged in the face of the many obstacles. Yet we need to remember that we are the church in the power and the presence of the Spirit. Through the Spirit we are marked as God’s people. Through the Spirit we as a community of faith experience a foretaste of that glorious future when “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” will stand before God’s throne and sing praises (Revelation 7:9-10). Through the indwelling of the Spirit “the future that is hoped for enters into history.”

God is great, God is good, let us praise him.