

Spiritual Blessings for Jews and Gentiles

Diego Silva

Passage: “In him *we* have obtained an inheritance...so that *we who were the first to hope in Christ* might be to the praise of his glory. In him *you also*, when *you* heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:11-14, ESV).

Introduction: Hostilities towards Jews in Germany in the 1930s intensified when the Nazi Party came to power in January 1933. Having been blamed for Germany’s economic problems after World War I, after Hitler came to power, laws were enacted that discriminated against Jews and excluded them from public life. They were banned from holding government jobs, practicing law or medicine, and teaching in public schools. They were also forbidden from owning businesses or attending public events.

In 1935, the Nazis passed the *Nuremberg Laws*, which defined who was Jewish and deprived Jews of German citizenship. The laws also prohibited intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews. The Nazis encouraged violence against Jews. In November 1938, they organized a nationwide pogrom known as *Kristallnacht*, or the Night of Broken Glass. During *Kristallnacht*, Nazi stormtroopers and their civilian supporters attacked Jewish businesses, synagogues, and homes. They killed at least 91 Jews and arrested over 30,000.

While a number of courageous Christians, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, opposed the Nazis or tried to help Jews during the Holocaust, the sad reality is that German Christians in general actively supported the Nazis and their anti-Semitic policies. The Nazi regime’s attempt to destroy the Jewish population in Europe was the culmination of centuries of *Judenhass* (“Jew Hate”). Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, rightly understood and embraced, would have prevented the mutual antipathy between Christians and Jews that has existed over the centuries and culminated in the horrible events of the Holocaust.

Tensions between Jews and Gentiles existed long before the time of Jesus. The unique customs of Jews (dietary restrictions, circumcision, Sabbath, monotheism, etc) resulted in strained relationships between them and Gentiles throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.¹ In the first century, Romans were an unwelcome occupying force in Israel, leading to further Jewish resentment towards foreigners. Remarkably, many Jews lived in large cities such as Alexandria, Rome, and Ephesus, where they were able to maintain their own culture and religion in spite of these hostilities. Additionally, there were a number of Jewish merchants and traders who played

¹ Jews were generally more sensitive to their religious scruples than the other peoples over which Rome ruled. These set them apart from the majority population. Furthermore, the Jews refused to worship the Greek and Roman gods, which was seen as a sign of disrespect.

an important role in the Greco-Roman economy. Among non-Jews in cities where Jewish communities existed, some were even attracted to certain features of their faith. Not many became Jewish converts, but a number were sympathizers who attended synagogues, observed some Jewish laws, and worshipped the God of Israel.

Many Jews living outside of Palestine received Paul's message and became disciples of Jesus. Many non-Jewish frequenters of Jewish synagogues also heard the gospel and joined the community of Jesus-followers in places like Ephesus. In addition, Gentiles who had very little prior experiential knowledge of Judaism also came to faith in Jesus. This would have created an enormous challenge for a missionary like Paul who was committed to not only planting but also nurturing communities of Jesus-followers. The complexities and challenges of bringing together Jews and Gentiles as one united, multi-cultural people of God undergird most of Paul's letters in the New Testament, and Ephesians is no exception.

Body:

- I. Paul's letter to "the saints who are in Ephesus" (1:1-2), written while the apostle was in prison,² was intended to circulate among various churches in Asia Minor.³
 - a. This may actually have been a circular letter meant to be read in all the churches in that part of Asia Minor, rather than one addressed specifically to the Ephesians.⁴
 - i. The words "in Ephesus" are not found in several of the earliest and most important manuscripts, including the Chester Beatty Papyrus II (Papyrus 46 or P46),⁵ the Codices Sinaiticus, and Vaticanus.
 - ii. There is very little content in Paul's letter to the Ephesians that resembles a response to a specific situation. No crisis is mentioned and no opponents are refuted.

² There is debate among scholars as to where Paul was imprisoned at the time he wrote Ephesians. While many scholars still hold the traditional view that Paul wrote from this letter from Rome, N.T. Wright argues that Paul wrote it to the churches in Asia Minor while imprisoned in Ephesus. See N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 2019), 450.

³ This sermon assumes Paul was the author of Ephesians. Though some scholars, like Andrew T. Lincoln (author of the Word Biblical Commentary series on Ephesians), reject Pauline scholarship, two main reasons for accepting Pauline authorship are compelling: (1) The text of Ephesians claims to be by Paul (Eph 1:1; 3:1) and has Pauline language and theology; (2) the witness of the early church is extensive for Pauline authorship; and (3) Pauline theology interwoven throughout.

⁴ Because the words ἐν Ἐφέσῳ (in Ephesus) "are absent from several important witnesses [manuscripts]...many commentators... suggest that the letter was intended as an encyclical, copies being sent to various churches, of which that at Ephesus was chief" (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 1971. Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1971, p. 601).

⁵ An early Greek New Testament manuscript written on papyrus. It is one of the oldest surviving manuscripts of the New Testament and is dated to between 175 and 225 CE. It contains verses from the Pauline Epistles of Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Hebrews. Papyrus 46 was discovered in the early 1930s by Alfred Chester Beatty, an Irish-British businessman and collector of manuscripts, in an ancient rubbish heap in the Egyptian town of al-Fayyum, along with other biblical and non-biblical papyrus fragments.

- iii. Unlike other letters written by Paul to specific churches, this one contains no personal greetings to his friends or colleagues.
 - iv. Paul mentions that he has “heard of your faith” and assumes that they have “heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you” (Eph 1:15; 3:2).
 - b. Paul refers to himself as “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20). He asks them “not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you” (Eph 3:13).
 - c. Paul sent this letter through a disciple named Tychicus.
 - i. In his final words, Paul assures the recipients that “Tychicus ... will tell you everything. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts” (Eph 6:21-22).
 - ii. The same Tychicus was sent to the Colossians with the same task, only to that church he went with Onesimus (Col 4:7-9).
 - iii. The letter to the Colossians must have been written around the same time given the mention of Tychicus and the similarity of the subject matter in both letters.
 - iv. After receiving a report from Epaphras about the church in Colossae (Col 1:7; 4:12; cf Philem 23), Paul wrote a letter to the Colossians and appointed Tychicus with the responsibility of delivering it (Col 4:7).
 - v. Recognizing that Tychicus would have to pass through Ephesus, Hierapolis, and Laodicea on his way to Colossae, Paul probably also entrusted Tychicus with the letter to be read in Ephesus (Eph 6:21).
 - vi. The letter to the Laodiceans (Col 4:13-16; cf 2:1)and to Philemon may also have been written around this time and sent with Tychicus along with the letters to the Colossians and Ephesians.
- II. Paul praises God for his blessings “lavished upon” his chosen people—the Jews (**1:3-12**).
- a. After praising “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing... (1:3), Paul goes on to list the blessings.
 - i. God “*chose* us...that we should be holy and blameless...he *predestined* us for **adoption** as sons” (4-5)
 - ii. In Jesus “we have **redemption**...the **forgiveness** of our trespasses” (7)
 - iii. God gave us **knowledge** of “the mystery of his will” (9)

- iv. “In him we have obtained **an inheritance**” (10)
- b. Paul introduces the theme of “the mystery of [God’s] will,” which is “to unite all things in heaven and things on earth” (1:10).
 - i. The believers to whom Paul is addressing this letter are folded into this mysterious and glorious plan of God.
 - ii. Paul will later point out that he, as God’s apostle, was given the stewardship of this mystery, “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs [with Jews], members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (3:1-6).
- c. That Paul has been referring to ethnic Jews up to this point is made clear by his description of the pronoun *we* (1:11-12) in contrast to *you* (1:13).
 - i. “...we [Jews] ... having been predestined ... were *the first to hope in Christ* In him you [Gentiles] also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed ...”
 - ii. Paul was an ethnic Jew and was among those who “were the first to hope in Christ,” though “one untimely born” (1 Cor 15:7).
 - iii. In his letter to the Romans, Paul states that the gospel was preached “to the Jew first and *also* to Greek” (Rom 1:16).
 - iv. Addressing Jews in Jerusalem, Peter said, “God, having raised up his servant, *sent him to you first*, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness” (Acts 3:26).
 - v. Jesus had alluded to the idea that ethnic Jews would be the “first” to hear about his messiahship (Matt 10:5-7; 15:24; Acts 1:8).
 - vi. Markus Barth agrees with this distinction, “A group called ‘we’ is distinct from another group addressed as ‘you.’ Though both participate in the same love, election, and grace of God and are *one* body, some were *first* called to constitute God’s people, others were added later.”⁶
 - vii. In Ephesians, Paul is clearly referring to ethnic Jews as “the circumcision,” in contrast to “*you* Gentiles in the flesh” (2:11), though the designation “Jews” occurs nowhere in Ephesians.
 - viii. Paul refers to ethnic Jews as “those who were near” in contrast to “*you* [Gentiles] who were far off” (2:17).

⁶ Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1–3*, vol. 34, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 92.

- ix. The Gentiles, before believing the gospel, were "strangers and aliens" (2:19) in relation to ethnic Jews.
 - x. As in Romans 1-3, Paul will eventually make the case that full solidarity in sin and grace joins Jews and Gentiles (2:1-10).
- III. Paul reminds his primary audience, Gentile-born believers, that they, like their fellow Jewish believers, also received the Holy Spirit when they believed the message of truth (1:13-14).
- a. That Paul's primary audience is Gentile-born disciples is evident throughout the letter (2:11-12; 3:1; 4:17-19).⁷
 - b. Paul reminds these former pagans that God gave them evidence of their acceptance among those "who were the first to hope in Christ," namely they "were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit" (1:13).
 - i. The terms on which Gentiles were included as God's people was a matter of serious debate among Jewish believers in Jerusalem (Acts 11:1-3; 15:1-5).
 - ii. In the Jerusalem Council, Peter argued that God gave proof of his acceptance of Gentile believers by "giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:6-9; cf 11:4-17).
 - iii. Paul uses the metaphor of sealing and guarantee in relation to the Spirit elsewhere (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 4:30).
 - iv. While in Ephesus, Paul had asked a group of Jews if they had received "the Holy Spirit when you believed? (Acts 19:2), indicating the importance of the reception of the Spirit in relation to full inclusion among God's people.
 - v. Paul also wrote to the Romans, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom 8:9).
- IV. After praising God's work among his chosen people (ethnic Jews), Paul proceeds to pray for similar fruits in the lives of the Gentile believers in Ephesus (**1:15-23**).

⁷ "It is to Gentile believers that this letter is specifically addressed, assuring them that their share in God's heritage is as full and firm as that of their brothers and sisters of Jewish birth" (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984, 264).

- a. Paul wants these Gentile converts to experience “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (v. 3) that has been experienced already by the believing Jewish community.
 - b. “With all wisdom and insight,” Paul had pointed out, “he has made known to *us* [Jews] the mystery of his will...” (1:9b, 10),
 - c. Now he prays that “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give *you* [Gentiles] a spirit of wisdom and revelation as *you* [Gentiles] come to know him ...” (1:17,18a).
 - d. “In him *we* [Jews] have redemption through his blood,” he had said, “the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on *us*” (1:7,8a).
 - e. He now prays that “*you* [Gentiles] may know...what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power” (1:18a, 19).
 - f. “In Christ *we* [Jews who first believed] have also obtained an *inheritance*, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will” (1:11).
 - g. He then prays that “...with the eyes of *your* heart enlightened, *you* may know what is the hope to which he has called *you*, what are the riches of his glorious *inheritance* among the saints” (1:18).
 - h. Paul prays that the Ephesians will know and understand that the “immeasurable greatness of his power,” which was exercised in the resurrection of Jesus (1:19-20), was granted to them in their conversion (cf 2:1-6).
- V. Paul’s goal in Ephesians is the coming together of Gentiles and Jews as God’s united people (3:1-5) and the formation and shaping of their identity as God’s new society (4:1).
- a. The separation between Jew and Gentile was purposeful and temporary.
 - b. Paul portrays Gentile Christians, not as second-class Christians but, as full members along with ethnic Jews who have placed their faith in Jesus.
 - i. A key to understanding the purpose of Ephesians lies in understanding the specific issues taking place in Colossians.
 - ii. Gentile converts were being disqualified for not adopting certain Jewish practices (Col 2:4-23).
 - c. Paul aims to assist recent Gentile converts to live a life worthy of their calling.

- i. Their new identity as members of God's family is to issue forth a new morality as God's people in a pagan world.
- ii. Paul also spends a great deal of time instructing Gentile converts on how to live as God's people (4:17—6:9).

Conclusion: Paul's letter to the Ephesians begins with a short salutation (1:1-2), followed by a benediction (1:3-14), thanksgiving (1:15-16), and prayer (1:17-23). As in many of his letters preserved in the New Testament, Paul in Ephesians will address the challenges of Jewish-Gentile relations in the church. Tensions between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus in other places undergirds Paul's emphasis on unity. Paul's vision for God's people was one of *expansion* and *redefinition*, not replacement, of Abraham's family. God has always had only one people. Paul's goal in Ephesians is to demonstrate that the two communities (believing Jews and believing Gentiles) have been constituted by God to experience the fullness of Jesus' resurrection together as one united people.