

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Twentieth Sunday after Trinity, October 17, 2010

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Hymns: 67, 613:5, 374, 129, 218:6.

Lessons: Deuteronomy 7:12, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 17:1-17.

Sermon Text: Ephesians 2:6-7.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

St. Paul in the first seven verses of chapter two of Ephesians paints the whole cycle of the Christian's life: past, present, and future.

In the past the Ephesian believers – Paul and us too – all who believe in Christ, were spiritually dead as shown by the Ephesians' evil deeds and Paul's evil thoughts and desires. But now, having been brought to faith in Christ, they are spiritually alive. That opens up grand new possibilities. In a manner of speaking, Christians already have everything. Even now in their lives of faith they are as good as in heaven with Christ. Remember Paul's bold statement at the close of the first chapter: "***God placed all things under [Christ's] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body.***" Ephesians 1:22-23

Christ has all power on earth and in heaven, and he uses it all for the benefit of his believers. This is why Paul can say that even while living here on earth they have been raised with Christ and are actually seated with him in heaven. Of course the full realization of the bliss of heaven is still in the future. But God did not make us alive just to give us a small foretaste of heaven. He did so "***in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.***"

As great and glorious as God's present blessings to us are they don't begin to compare with what God will do for his believers in heaven. Scripture tries to help us form some concept of heaven. Today we are reminded again of

THE INCOMPARABLE RICHES OF GOD'S GRACE REVEALED

- 1. The ultimate revelation will be for all believers in heaven.**
- 2. This is purely a gift of God's grace – by grace you have been saved!**

We are leading up to what is possibly a summary of the greatest message of the Bible: "***For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.***"

The only way we can enter eternal life in heaven is through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, was sent to earth to save men from all their sins. There can be no savior without something to save people from. Sin holds all men captive. The power of the devil holds all men captive. Death holds all men captive. But Jesus broke the power of these three, the "unholy three" they have been called. We must recognize that we are sinners. God's law shows us that. But that isn't the end. The gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that we are saved by faith in Jesus the Christ. We are freed from sin, the power of the devil, and eternal death and damnation. As a result, we have the assurance of eternal life in heaven. In this way Jesus Christ is our Savior.

Scripture refers to heaven in several different ways. For example, it refers to life in heaven as a grand wedding banquet, and it also compares heaven to a glorious city paved with gold set with precious gemstones. All those pictures however, fall short of the real thing – as they must of course – because what God has in store for us is incomparable to use Paul’s word. There simply is nothing in our present range of experience that can compare with heaven. This is because God’s love and mercy, which is inexpressibly great, is expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

St. Paul here shows us the present blessing that the Ephesian believers and we already enjoy, and the even greater riches we by faith may confidently anticipate in heaven. So wonderful are these blessings: God has raised us with Jesus and placed us with Him in the heavenly regions in Christ Jesus. Christ, as true man, was raised from the dead and placed at the right hand of God, where He now leads a heavenly mode of existence. We read of that in 1 Corinthians 15:45-50 ***"So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven. I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable."***

In the same way we, by our conversion, have become partakers of the same eternal existence in heaven. Paul here speaks of heaven and our living in heaven as if it has already been accomplished! ***"God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."***

The mind, heart, and soul of the believer is now set, inclined, toward heavenly things. The exalted Christ has elevated our spirit into the spiritual, divine, heavenly life, all by means of the Gospel of our salvation. We read of that in Ephesians 1:13: ***"And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit."***

In a sense we already enjoy the blessings of Christ’s kingdom while we are on earth. All believers are part of his kingdom of the Holy Christian Church, that invisible gathering of all believers of all time. It is not an earthly kingdom, a visible kingdom as Jesus tells us when he stands before Pontius Pilate in John 18:36 ***"Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.""***

Every place where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered is the threshold, the door to the kingdom of heaven. Christ’s kingdom is established here on earth. It is a heavenly kingdom.

God seated us in his own gracious presence in the invisible church, amid all his children, at the table of his Word and sacraments, under the shadow of his mercy and love.

God has raised us up together with Christ and seated us together with him in the heavenly places.

Christ’s coming back to life from the grave, and Christ’s resurrection and Christ’s sitting at the right hand of God in heaven all assure us of our transformation to be completed when we leave this vale of tears and are taken to be with our Savior. It will be finalized on the last day when our souls shall be reunited with our glorified bodies and taken to be with Christ in heaven eternally.

God ***"seated us ... in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."***

God intends to make a grand display of his wondrous grace before all the angels and the saints in heaven “*in the coming ages*”. Another translation of “ages” is eons, that is, endless ages of time. The word denotes the endlessness of eternity. This is an interesting picture which is limited by our feeble human reference to time. We really cannot imagine eternity, a place where time has no end. When time shall be no more, when all God’s saving work shall have reached its glorious goal, when the timeless eons of eternity have come, we who believe in Jesus Christ shall continue to experience the exceeding riches of God’s grace. Because of the limitation of our finite minds the Scriptures used terms that denote time when they speak of eternity, which, in reality, is time-less-ness.

Who can describe all that God has in store for us?

Even in the endless eons to come everything will be pure grace, undeserved love and favor. After God has removed every trace of sin from us and has brought us to perfection and glory in heaven, God’s grace will still have endless goodness and kindness to lavish upon us.

Paul freely interchanges the words “you” and “us” in this paragraph. If we think these two words refer only to the Gentile Ephesians and to Paul and the Jewish Ephesians we are wrong. Paul is speaking of himself in the word “us”, and also speaking of you and me in the word “you”, as he speaks to all readers of this book.

From eternity to eternity – forever – everything is connected with Jesus who is the Anointed one of God

If we think of what unites us with God, that is faith.

God’s purpose in working regeneration in us in this manner is finally stated: That He might show in the ages that are coming the superabundant wealth of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Our salvation here in time is an advance payment, earnest-money, assuring us of the last and most perfect manifestation of God’s grace, which lies beyond the present age and world. When the ages of this world come to an end and the period of eternity dawns upon us, then we, who were by nature children of wrath, but now are partakers of God’s grace in Christ, shall experience the full riches of the grace of God. In Christ Jesus, our Redeemer and Mediator, we shall then receive the full goodness and kindness of God. In all of eternity, we shall see the face of our heavenly Father and taste and see the beauty of the Lord, ‘forever and ever’, in a ‘world without end’.

All these wonderful blessings are gifts of God’s free grace: For by his grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. This gift comes from God, it is God’s gift, not the result of any works that we could do, so that no human should boast. By and in our regeneration and conversion we have been made partakers of the salvation gained by Christ. We have been awakened from spiritual death and given life in and with Christ. We have become justified before God. All this is a work of God’s free grace, transmitted to us through the hand of faith. We are thus regenerated, justified, by faith. In our heart, which was spiritually dead, God has lighted the flame of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And this flame, just as soon as it sent up the first spark and began to glow, spread life throughout our formerly dead soul. In this way faith is the beginning of the new spiritual life. In this work of spiritual regeneration, of quickening to new life, all cooperation on the part of man is expressly and emphatically excluded. It is God’s free gift and gracious present, not a reward for works performed by man by which he might have made himself worthy of being regenerated in the sight of God. There was no merit in us. All boasting on the part of man is cut off absolutely. On our part we have not contributed even the slightest part toward our conversion. It was not caused by any favorable conduct on our part. The glory of that salvation belongs wholly to God and in no degree to man. It has been so planned and worked in us as to take from us any possible reason for boasting.

God saved us. For that we are eternally thankful. ***"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."*** Galatians 6:14. Amen.