

Ephesians 1

One of the greatest, if not the greatest of all, preachers in Britain in the twentieth century

- Was Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones
- Born in Cardiff in December 1899, he became a doctor of medicine
- And started work as assistant to the Royal Physician in London
- But after struggling over the call to preach for two years
- In 1927 he returned to Wales to be minister of a chapel in Aberafan, Port Talbot
- In 1939 he became assistant minister of Westminster Chapel and minister in 1943
- His expository preaching (firmly rooted in the text of the Bible) drew hundreds
- And his Friday evening Bible studies were effectively sermons attracted great crowds
- I was privileged to hear him twice when I was in my late teens
- And, despite his sermons being about 50 minutes long, was gripped by his preaching

It is my contention that too much modern preaching does not wrestle with the Bible text

- A religious discourse might be more entertaining
- And less hard work for congregation and preacher alike
- But that is not what I am setting out to do
- Instead, I am setting out to take a passage of the Bible
- And try to share with you what I believe God is saying to us through that passage
- I am doing this because I believe that the primary way God speaks to us
- Is through the text of the Bible – and that by really engaging with the scripture text
- It is possible to ‘hear’ the authentic voice of God in our hearts

Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ series of 37 sermons on Ephesians 1 are published in a book

- *God’s Ultimate Purpose*
- I cannot hope to replicate the preaching work that he did in his strategic ministry
- Partly because I shall never be as great a preacher as him – few people ever will
- Partly because the way of working in the Methodist Church is different
- Partly because I do not have the opportunity to preach for nearly three hours a week

It would be good to have the discipline of preaching 37 times on this chapter - at least for me!

- Instead I have set myself a different challenge – just one sermon on a great chapter
- And on these few words from verses 7 and 8 from Ephesians Chapter 1

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

Here are three things that every preacher should be preaching about

- And that every hearer should want to know
- At its very heart it is a message about Jesus Christ and proclaims
- In him we have:

- I REDEMPTION THROUGH HIS BLOOD
- II THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS
- III THE RICHES OF GOD’S GRACE

I REDEMPTION THROUGH HIS BLOOD

I think it was George Bernard Shaw who famously said that the USA and UK were

- ‘Two nations divided by a common language’
- in short this means that although we are familiar with the words
- we are not necessarily sure what the words mean

Ten years ago I had my first PC

- before computers ‘icon’ was a painting in an Orthodox Church
- and a mouse was a small, furry rodent
- but now both those words have been invested with new meaning

It is a common complaint that Christianity is often expressed in unintelligible language

- I suppose that this is partly true
- But in fact that are very few things that do not either introduce new words
- Or clothe old words with new meanings

Again, this is part of the importance of the preacher’s task

- To help bridge the gap between the world of the New Testament and today
- This is rather like holiday luggage – in the airport you check in two pieces
- But the two pieces are packed with specific contents

In this New Testament phrase ‘redemption through his blood’

- We have words that most people understand and yet which have ‘Christian’ meaning
- We have words that are clothed with a special meaning
- And the two significant words ‘redemption’ and ‘blood’ need unpacking

But before moving on to ‘redemption’ and ‘blood’ let’s deal with a small word – ‘his’

- The little word ‘his’ refers to Christ – the one whom God loves
- The letter to the Ephesians has opened with what we call a ‘doxology’
- That is, it is an outpouring of praise to God

One of the really interesting things about this outpouring of praise to God (worship)

- Is that it has real, solid, narrative content
- That’s not to say that there is no place for simple praise
- But it is a timely reminder that there is a place for deeper, more complex praise

Christian faith and life have their centre in Christ, God’s Son

- Through him, God has determined that all who believe on his Son should be saved
- The word ‘redemption’ has to do with the freedom either of slaves or of prisoners
- But the term also implies that a price has to be paid ‘through his blood’
- The Hebrews understood blood in the sense of ‘violent death’ or ‘bloodshed’
- In the Old Testament there was a sense of sacrifice being ‘life yielded up in death’
- Now we can move to a position of understanding
- This refers to the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross – not just an event in history
- It is by the sacrificial death of Christ, God’s Son, that slaves or prisoners are set free
- But who are these slaves or prisoners and what is holding them captive?

II THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

'Forgiveness of sins' is added as a further explanation of redemption

- The word translated 'forgiveness' has the sense of loosing someone from what binds
- A person who is a slave or a prisoner is no longer held captive but set free

There were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire (the population of modern Britain)

- These slaves could be bought or sold like animals or household items
- But it was possible to buy a slave and to give that slave freedom
- This is the same language used to explain God redeeming Israel from slavery

Now, many of us today might make the assumption

- even if 'redemption through his blood' was English clothed with special meaning
- that everyone would readily understand 'forgiveness of sins'
- but in our modern society I wonder whether that is truly the case

The word translated 'sins' here has the sense of 'trespasses' (straying from the path)

- that is not to say that another aspect of sin 'falling short' or 'missing the mark'
- is not included for the Apostle Paul uses a similar phrase in Colossians about that

We live in a society that appears not to accept that very much is sin

- that is not to say that nothing in society is wrong but that nothing is an offence to God
- as with so many theological mistakes the root is a misunderstanding of God
- if there is no God, or if God is just a bigger and better version of myself
- then there is scarcely anything worthy of the label sin and no need of forgiveness
- there is a trend in modern society to apologise on behalf of others
- for people today to apologise in vague institutional terms for the evils of the past
- but conveniently to sidestep or forget their own sins

It seems a realistic possibility to me for a slave never to contemplate the hope of freedom

- and simply to resolve to the make the best of the prevailing circumstances
- the term 'glass ceiling' is often used to describe the way certain groups of people
- often women or minority groups are prevented from gaining high-level promotion
- the description 'glass' being used because it is not immediately apparent
- in our society, isn't it the case that people are living in a glass prison
- so many people do not recognise their imprisonment to sin (does it even exist)
- the prodding of their conscience (is it only an illness to be cured by psychotherapy)
- or the nagging existence of guilt (that only keeping busy can keep at bay)

Isn't this just the point that Jesus was making when he said, 'the truth will set you free'

- but unbelieving Jews replied that, as Abraham's descendants, they had not been slaves
- the irony being that while their forced labour in Egypt and deportation to Babylon
- were temporary – their slavery to unbelief and sin was a contrast to Abraham

Only with the seriousness of sin before us that we can contemplate the wonder of forgiveness

- repentance and forgiveness need to be taken seriously and all the more so in church
- repentance is treading a new and right path – doing everything possible to undo wrong

III THE RICHES OF GOD'S GRACE

Before anyone thinks that the Christian faith is merely turning over a new leaf

- repentance from a life of sin to a life of good works is not enough
- one of the greatest lies of history is that posted by the Nazis
- at the entrance to the concentration camps, such as Sachsenhausen and Auschwitz
- *Arbeit Macht Frei* – work makes you free
- Pharisees (of every age not just the New Testament) show that not to be the case
- Again, instead of focusing upon ourselves, it is a matter of focusing on God

The focus of praise in Ephesians 1:3-14 is what God has done in Christ.

- It is a prayer of thanksgiving – for the abundance of God's grace
- Grace is a great theme of this letter to the Ephesians
- Grace is a summary word for the Christian gospel (2 Corinthians 6:1)
- It captures the great mercy of the superior to an unworthy, undeserving inferior
- In short, grace is 'God's unbelievable acceptance of us'

When I was in Germany I visited Heubach, the home of my friends Gunter and Gabi

- And also the home of *Triumph International*
- A leading manufacturer of swimsuits and underwear
- After visiting the museum and history of underwear
- I was then taken along to the factory shop, presented with a shopping basket
- Which was then well-filled the refrain being, 'you must buy this for Janet'
- At the till I was presented with a bill for E63.50, which was a close call
- Because I only had E64.00 – consequently when I gave Gunter 50c for parking
- I was completely cleaned out – not a Eurocent to my name!

Grace is the reality that we need for life

- But when we think of the great price that it must be to set sinners free
- Or even of the individual sins that stand against our name
- We might wonder if there will be enough in the store of God's grace for us
- Which is why the Apostle's doxology or great hymn of praise
- Tells us of the riches of God's grace which he has lavished upon us
- God values us and seeks us despite our failure and sin
- There is no limit to the grace and mercy of God – not in height, or breadth or depth
- The price might be expensive beyond measurement – but it is paid in full
- Through the blood of Christ – a shorthand way of summing up his death on the cross

This is the gospel of salvation

- Many in our culture have no sense of any need for salvation
- And yet it is clear enough that people are imprisoned by unbelief, sin and death
- In the New Testament there is an urgency about proclaiming the riches of God's grace
- Not because his grace will run out
- But because the time in which we may receive it is running out
- The gracious call of Christ is like a proposal of marriage to share life in eternity
- But to decline or put off accepting that proposal is to miss out on that shared life

The difficult and yet important emphasis of this letter to the Ephesians

- Is what it means to be 'in Christ'
- Evangelical Christians rightly speak of 'receiving Christ in our hearts'
- But we place less emphasis on being 'in Christ'
- The expression 'in Christ' or equivalent appears numerous times in Ephesians
- It is a way of expression our relationship with Christ

The focus of so much modern thinking, even within the church, is on the individual

- And, therefore, individual salvation is so often stressed – that is not wrong
- But it is wrong if it is to the exclusion of an understanding of being 'in Christ'
- That is, once you were a 'no one' but now you are a 'someone' – in Christ
- The key to understanding this concept is found in the opening verse
- The readers are 'saints and believers who are in Ephesus'
- But they are also 'in Christ Jesus' – it is a matter of a new relationship and new home
- The new relationship is with God through Jesus Christ
- The new home is the heavenly realms in which the believer is now blessed
- 'Heavenly realms' does not refer to much to a physical location
- as to a spiritual reality countering the notion that this world is the only reality
- and contending that a greater reality exists where Jesus Christ is Lord
- the believer is not heading toward heaven because he or she has found the way
- the believer is heading toward heaven in Christ – who is the way

From time to time you might be in the difficult situation of receiving contradictory advice

- take the simple matter of directions to a place you have not visited before
- one person gives you one set of direction and another person different directions
- your reasons for choosing to accept one set of directions might be complex
- but ultimately it will depend on who you think is reliable and whom you trust

With regard to eternity – it matters who you trust

- the message of the cross makes sense
- when the union between Christ and the believer is so strong
- that in some way his death is our death and his life is our life
- by his incarnation (and his baptism) Christ identifies with us
- through faith in his death and resurrection and repenting to follow his way
- we identify with him and the Holy Spirit bears witness in our hearts that we are his
- with the promise that the work begun in us will be completed

Paul uses five key words to describe Christianity — grace, truth, faith, love, and hope

- it can never be a matter of rule-keeping – that asks us to conform
- instead it is a matter of grace – that enables us to be transformed
- this happens not by believing enough facts but by being joined to Christ 'in him'

God has chosen to have a people for himself – and he has chosen this people, in Christ

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.