



Sunday, January 3, 2021

Divine Blessings in Christ

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Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14

Diagram that sentence. No, really. If you are over a certain age, you will understand what I mean when I say, diagram that sentence. But if you are younger than that, you might scratch your head, and you might be even more surprised that, in bygone days, students would be tested in their English grammar by going to the board and then drawing lines that branch off here and there, like a roadmap of Allegheny County, along which you wrote the subject and the verb and the various clauses and other features of a sentence, showing how they supported the subject and verb.

So you went to the blackboard, picked up some chalk, and visually arranged the components of sentence structure, and different parts of speech, in order to map out the best way to show the construction of the sentence. Diagramming uses straight lines and slanted lines to help you separate, analyze, and organize the function of your words in a way that delivers the clearest picture. Can we admit that it was a somewhat tedious exercise, fraught with as many pitfalls as a Pittsburgh street is fraught with potholes? And yet, in the end, you understood the makeup of the sentence much better than you did before.

Now here in the beginning of Ephesians, we have this passage which, in the original language, is one excessively long run-on sentence.

Ephesians 1:3-14 is comprised of many compound clauses, the principal clause being verse 3: "... *who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*"

While our task may not be to diagram the entire sentence, today I am going to concentrate on that principal clause; it has four parts:

- *God has blessed us*

You understand this truth and you live it. You do not think your lives, as they are, are happenstance. Nor do you have the faulty notion that you somehow made it happen all on your own. You recognize that it is God's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. Yes, whatever we count as a joy or gain or ability, we know it came from the Almighty — what you take for granted, as well as what you gratefully acknowledge.

"God bless you" is not just a phrase we say when someone sneezes. God blesses you day in and day out, with sunshine and rain, with activity and rest, with food and water, with a roof over your head, with friends who love you, with people who need you.

How do you recapture that sense of blessing, if you have lost it? It is up to you. Some people keep a journal or diary. If they have kept it faithfully, they can revisit what they wrote and find, scattered on those pages, many blessings.

Some people take photographs. After a while, they manage to accumulate — especially in these days, when they live on our smart phones and do not often get printed and framed. If you do that, you can scroll back, over the year, for instance, and see, throughout those photos, blessings visually represented.

Some folks miss their blessings most of the time. They are so busy concentrating on their most onerous duties, or their saddest experiences, that they blot out their blessings. That is a shame. Because life is not all shadows; into every life a little sunlight does fall. Why not bask in the blessings?

God has blessed us. Where has God blessed us? Our Scripture passage says that God has blessed us:

- *in the heavenly realms*

So far I have been talking about blessings in the earthy realms, but the letter to the Ephesians makes it clear that the blessings are in the heavenly realms. I suppose someone would be able to argue that means that the blessings are on their way, rather than here. Just like 2021 is on its way, but scarcely here, today. If you said that, you might be correct. But I suspect what the writer of the letter to the Ephesians means is that the blessings have an eternal aspect to them. Friends on earth will become friends in eternity. What we share here will be a continual blessing. What we learn, here and now, will help us in our everlasting understanding. Our lives shall become like a watered garden, and we shall never languish again. It is as if the places we go, and the things that we do, here and throughout our lives, have another dimension, a heavenly dimension, about them. That means that no day is ordinary; that nothing is wasted; that the people who come into our lives do so as either a blessing or a learning experience, and they are often both at the same time; that the music we enjoy now, we will thrill to long into the uncharted future. Blessings here serve as a holy prelude to blessings that are in the heavenly realm.

Now our Scripture goes on to say:

- *with every spiritual blessing*

So, once we have placed ourselves with one foot in this world, and one foot in the kingdom of God, we can look as trusting believers at what is yet to be. You know, like Robert Browning says: "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be." Or as Isaiah writes: "*Even to your old age and gray hairs I am He, I am He who will sustain you. ... I will be your God throughout your lifetime — until your hair is white with age.*"

What are spiritual blessings? Blessings that transcend our senses. Blessings that take us to a holy place. Blessings that give us a sense of God's presence. Blessings that we can enjoy now and later.

Which of these spiritual blessings are your favorites? God chose you, before the earth was formed. You are holy and blameless, in Jesus Christ. You have received Christ's unconditional love. God's promises are for you. You belong to God's holy family. You are accepted, redeemed, and forgiven in Christ. The riches of Christ's grace abound, in you. The exceeding greatness of His power is toward you who believe — the same power that brought the worlds into being and that raised Christ from the dead. We have received the Holy Spirit as our comfort and advocate even as we have become God's children.

When we begin to consider these and so many more spiritual blessings that God has given to us, we can rejoice and be glad.

Where are these spiritual blessings? Our verse from Ephesians takes us to the place — no, *the Person*, where we find our answer:

- *in Christ.*

Our spiritual blessings are in Christ. How do we compare it? It is like what people keep in their safe or their safe deposit box, times a zillion-jillion-gazillion. It is like a supply of goodness that is always increasing and never running out. An "ever flowing stream" is one way that the Bible talks about it. It is the cup of blessing that is always full and never empty. It is the anticipated help and unanticipated unfolding of God's will in our lives. We may call it God's providence, combined with God's miraculous concern for us. And still there is more. But we begin to get the picture — the picture of God's wondrous grace, as found in Christ, and as given freely to all who will believe.

We began by talking about diagramming a sentence. I think we would be on safe ground to end that way, as well. But I would not ask you to diagram a sentence as long as Ephesians 1:3-14. So here is a shorter one: "Jesus Christ opened Eternity for [your name here]." What is the noun in this sentence? And of course, the answer is there are three proper nouns in this sentence: Jesus Christ, Eternity, and your name.

There is always more to know and understand. But that is more than enough blessings, for now and forevermore. Amen.