

CCUA, SS Initiative
 April 5, 2026, Easter

“ . . . In Christ ”

“He is risen!” (“He is risen, indeed!”)

Introduction:

1. College Church has announced Easter Sunday as one of its “Family Sundays.” That means we will not be meeting as Sunday School classes for any age. This will allow families to sit together for the worship service. Several other things will be going on during that time which you will be able to enjoy as you either watch online or participate on-site.

For both the class and for those who follow along with the lessons sent out during the week, I felt it was necessary to prepare a printed lesson anyway. For one reason, we will be spending the next 8 Sundays working our way through Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. I didn’t want us to miss out on any of these lessons. And the first two are too important to try to push them together into one.

2. The letter to the Ephesians in some ways is a unique letter of Paul, both in terms of its content and its addressees. The content does not address any specific situations of any of the local churches in the same way as all Paul’s other letters. It also seems odd that Paul doesn’t greet any specific persons by name, given the fact that Paul was in Ephesus between 1 ½ and 3 years (including a round-trip from Ephesus to Corinth during that time). Furthermore, manuscript evidence has copies with no name in it as an addressee. It would appear, then, that this letter fits the category of a circular letter: that is, one that was sent to a lot of churches, and written in such a way that each church would recognize itself as the intended audience of the letter. These features have captured the attention of several scholars of the 19th and early 20th century biblical critical movement, which caused immediate negative reaction from conservative Christians through the first and second thirds of the 20th century. That critical movement was a natural continuation of the various European “Enlightenments” as it carried over into the universities where Professors rebelled, in a way, against the authoritarianism of the Church dictating what they could or could not teach, or how they conducted their research in theology and biblical studies.

[Sidebar: Next Sunday night, the 12th of April, I will be presenting my work at West Africa Theological Seminar, where I have taught New Testament Biblical Criticism as a positive tool for conservative Biblical Interpretation on a semi-regular basis since 2003. I will be giving an initial negative approach to that movement, and how conservative scholars eventually noted, taught, and put into practice the good things that have resulted from it.]

What is unique about Ephesians as it relates to this topic, is that some of the questions of authorship and audience predate the modern critical movement by more than a millennium without any hint of negative criticism. What I can say without destroying my conscience or denying any theory of inspiration is that what we have in this letter is the teaching of Paul and

that at least one copy of the letter was sent to the church at Ephesus where, most likely, it was included in one of the earliest collections of Paul's letters.

It would appear that a major theme of the letter is that of the "new humanity" that God is creating through the gospel. This new humanity is not Gentiles assimilating themselves into Judaism, or Jewish believers somehow accommodating themselves into being in vital, personal relationship with Gentiles. Neither is the case. God is creating this new humanity through the lived-out message of Easter: believers die with Christ and are raised to new life in Christ, in which the former distinctions of race, gender, status, and wealth no longer serve as divisive categories. All believers are one new race--the "in-Christ" people. To put it bluntly, Ephesians calls us to eliminate any language that might perpetuate the former divisions held in place by the non-believers. In the new creation, there is only one humanity—the "in-Christ."

3. Today's lesson covers the first 14 verses of Ephesians chapter 1. Verses 1 & 2 fit the pattern of Paul's salutation we find in all his letters. We will look at the elements of that salutation briefly in the lesson. The rest of this text, verses 3-14, is often referred to as one long sentence. However, that's probably the wrong way to look at it. Those verses are a unique form of literature, neither prose nor poetry, and shouldn't be thought of as a sentence *per se*. They are an example of, in Jewish worship language, a *b'racha*. That is, they are in the form of an opening blessing in a worship service liturgy. In fact, the entire letter to the Ephesians could be understood as a model worship service liturgy for Christian believers. It includes the opening blessing, various model prayers, times for songs, a homily, and a benediction. In synagogue worship, which many New Testament scholars see as the model for earliest Christian worship, the service begins with a recited blessing. That's how these verses are formatted. The passage could be memorized and recited by everyone together during several worship services. Or, it could be presented as a kind of choral reading with different lines recited by different voices, in which each line either includes or finishes with an "in-Christ" declaration. (A sample of such a reading is attached to this lesson.)

1. The opening salutation. Ephesians 1:1-2

The opening salutation of any Pauline letter includes the name(s) of the sender(s), the name(s) of the recipient(s), and a brief, Christian greeting (modified from the standard letter format of the Greco-Roman culture). Other things could be added making the salutation unique to the situation being addressed. This letter contains a couple of additions that set the tone for hearing the rest of the letter. The first addition is the way that Paul introduces himself. It is both formal and authoritative. This is the first clue that this letter could have more addresses than just the church at Ephesus. Paul would not have to introduce himself as both "an apostle" and "by the will of God" to a church which he planted and where he ministered for three years. Most of his other letters use language that's a bit more familiar right from the beginning. Also, this language creates a tone of authority, as though what's coming will need to be taken very seriously, as a message from God himself that will need to be put into practice (this is the sense derived from the meaning of "apostle.")

The second thing he adds to the greeting is a brief description of the addressees. The first word is “saints” which he uses in other letters, in particular in the letters to the Corinthians. That actual word is “holy ones,” which is usually translated as saints. To that word, however, he adds an unusual addendum: “and to ‘the faithful in Christ Jesus.’” This could be easily translated as “those who are believers in Christ Jesus,” which comes across with easier grammar, but which also overlooks what’s happening in the letter. In v. 1 of this letter, by adding this phrase to the description of the addressees of the letter, Paul inaugurates his principal theme of the new humanity, by introducing believers as “in Christ.” (NOTE: “believers” and “faithful” (as a plural) is the same word in Greek.) The word order is precise—in Christ Jesus, with Christ first. As a circular letter, it is addressed to all the saints wherever they are, whether or not they know who Paul is, but he insists that they are all “faithful ones, in Christ.” Race, gender, people group, status are all combined into the title, “in Christ.”

Verse 2 presents Paul’s standard greeting beginning with “grace and peace,” the word “grace” being a Christian adaptation of the Greek standard salutation, “greetings.” and “peace” being the Jewish standard salutation that has been brought into Christian practice. The rest of the greeting, creates an interpretational problem around the word “and.” Its position in the sentence raises the issue as to whether the ‘and’ combines two sources of the greeting, that is, from God the father and from Jesus Christ, or two distinctions of who calls God father, that is, our father and the father of Jesus Christ. This is one of those cases where the “both/and” is the most likely the best reading. It does indicate, however, that Paul recognizes a distinction between God the Father and Jesus. Just how well he had that distinction resolved in his own mind is uncertain. Jesus, himself, made that distinction, even though he also said, “we are one.”

II. A Christian b’racha: Ephesians 1:3-14

Often this text is broken down into different parts with some artificial structuring, so that it can be analyzed individually. I’m not going to do that here. The independent clause of the entire blessing, including the subject and the verb are included in the first line of verse 3. All other lines of the text, including the second clause of verse 3, are dependent clauses introduced by either participles, verbs in the infinitive, or relative pronouns. Those clauses are punctuated by a seven-fold repetition, in different forms, of the phrase “in Christ,” which I’m going to suggest they be recited as an introduction to the “new humanity” theme that will be addressed later in the letter. The ‘new humanity’ which God is creating is, indeed, those who have faith “in Christ”—the ‘in-Christ’ believers. (Please refer to the attached form of the text to see how the recitation works with the “in-Christ” interjections at several places.)

For the members of our class who have the quarterly we work from, you will notice that the lesson writer divided this recitation into three parts for discussion. I don’t want to do that, because the text functions more like the opening Psalm we read as we beginning every Sunday morning worship service. We let the whole Psalm stand on its own. On the other hand, I recognize the need to make some comments on the theological content of this “blessing,” and I will take the opportunity to do that.

The first issue has to do with the language of election (“choosing” and “predestination”). For centuries this language has been misunderstood and even today it is a dividing point within broader Christianity. The misunderstanding is that whenever this language is used, and particularly in this text (cf. vv. 4, 5, and 11), it is not about **who** has been chosen to become believers, but rather **for what** believers were chosen or predestinated. Nowhere does the text say certain people have been selected to be saved and others not. Believers do not become believers by predestination but by responding to the gospel by God’s grace and through faith. Once they become believers, they are included among the chosen “to be holy and blameless” and predestined “to be adopted as God’s children” through Jesus Christ. We don’t have the power to choose by some so-called free will. We are “slaves to sin,” without freedom to make any choices that would change that situation. God provides prevenient grace in our sinful condition by which the Holy Spirit helps us admit our sinful condition, understand the gospel, and empowers to believe that gospel for our salvation. The issue that must be taken seriously, however, is that, as believers, we now have free will—we can choose to remain faithful and follow in the direction of God’s choice and predestination for us, or to settle for less.

The second point I would like to underscore is the concept of “mystery” given in v. 9 and beyond. Here is where we find the unique message of Easter. Paul borrows the word ‘mystery’ from the vocabulary of pagan religions of his day--the “Mystery Religions.” These were religions, in which the teachings were secret, shared only by the initiated, indoctrinated members of the cult. The word ‘mystery’ combined the two ideas of ‘unique doctrine’ and ‘secret.’ One such mystery religion today is Mormonism. There are some public aspects of what they believe, but the real ‘doctrines’ are given to and maintained by only those who have completed the initiation process and vow to keep them secret.

Paul borrows the word ‘mystery’ to refer to the unique doctrines of the Christian faith. But whenever he uses the word, he clarifies that the Christian mysteries are publicly declared to everyone who will listen whenever some aspect of the gospel is proclaimed. In this text, ‘mystery’ includes everything that follows from verse 7 to the end of the recitation. The text doesn’t specifically say anything about the resurrection or Easter. But everything in the ‘mystery’ is based on Easter. Without the resurrection, there is no forgiveness of sins. Without the resurrection, there is no changing of the times. Without the resurrection, there is no unity to all things in heaven and on earth. Something more appears to be going on here, as well, in terms of the title (or even the name), Christ. The Greek word “*christos*” is a direct translation of the Hebrew, ‘*masiah*,’ ‘messiah.’ However, in Paul’s theology, Jesus is more than just the Jewish messiah. He appears to use “Christ” to mean something more. And here, we see the risen Jesus as the agent of creation as it comes to the ‘new humanity.’ Notice that the ‘mystery’ of the gospel fulfilled in Christ, has nothing to do with a racially specific political unit in charge over all the world. Furthermore, although God has a covenant relationship with the descendants of Jacob, here the mystery of God’s possession (v.14) has nothing to do with race, but with faith in Christ and the guarantee of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the lives of believers. All believers, who, upon hearing the Gospel and putting their hope in Christ, are now members of the new humanity and included in God’s possession—the “in-Christ” possession of God.

Ephesians 1:3-14
A Recited *B'racha*

3. [ALL] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
Who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms **in Christ**
4. [WOMEN] as he chose us **[ALL] in Him**
before the creation of the world that we should be holy and blameless in His sight
5. [MEN] in love, predestinating us into adoption as children **[ALL] through Jesus Christ**
unto Him according to His pleasure and will
6. [WOMEN] for the purpose of praising His glorious grace which He granted to us
[ALL] in the beloved one
7. [MEN] in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of transgressions
in accordance with the riches of His grace
8. [WOMEN] that He lavished on us in all wisdom and understanding
9. [MEN] making known unto us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure which
he purposed **[ALL] in Christ**
10. [WOMEN] to be put into effect in the fullness of time, to bring all things into unity
[ALL] in Christ
11. [MEN] in whom we too were chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him
who works out everything according to His purpose and will
12. [WOMEN] so that we might be the praise of His glory, we the first who put our hope
[ALL] in Christ
13. [MEN] in whom you also, when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your
salvation and in whom, when you believed, you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit
14. [WOMEN] who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of those who are
God's possessions **[ALL] to the praise of His glory.**

Note: capital letters on pronouns indicate an interpretation where God (the Father) is more appropriate as the antecedent than either Christ or the Holy Spirit.