

02. Ephesians 1:1-5



Ephesians 1:1

Paul, an apostle of the Messiah Jesus by the will of God

Using, as always, his Roman name, **Paul** refers to himself as an ‘**apostle**’. He is writing this letter in an official capacity by virtue of the commission given him by the risen Jesus to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. He is ‘**an apostle of the Messiah Jesus**’, not only because it is from Jesus that he receives his commission, but also because he belongs to Jesus and shares his life. It is out of this communion that he is writing, and so he wishes his readers, as they hear this letter proclaimed, to hear the Risen Jesus speaking through him. Paul is an apostle, not by his own choice, but **by the will of God**. He is also assuring his readers that he is writing to them out of his prayer and because he has discerned that it is God’s will that he do so. We are right to speak of this letter as inspired and to refer to it as ‘the word of God’.

Ephesians 1:1

to the saints who are faithful in the Messiah Jesus:

He addresses them as ‘**saints**’ because they have been set aside and sanctified by God’s Holy Spirit

‘All the congregation are saints (holy), everyone of them: the Lord is among them’ (Numbers 16:3).

They are ‘**faithful**’ because they welcomed in faith the good news that was proclaimed to them.

They are ‘**in the Messiah Jesus**’ because they are sharing in the communion of love that is the life of the Risen Jesus. He is living in them, and they are living in him in a shared communion with God.

Ephesians 1:2

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus the Messiah.

The customary Greek greeting was χαίρειν (see Acts 15:23; 23:26). Paul uses a similar sounding word, χάρις (**grace**) – a greeting that reminds the Christian assembly of God’s action in their lives in drawing them to share the life of the risen Jesus – a life of communion in love with his Father through the shared bond of the Holy Spirit. Paul’s prayer is that they will continue to experience the graciousness of God pouring out his love upon them.

The customary Jewish greeting was shalom (**peace** εἰρήνη). Paul repeats this greeting here, for his prayer is that they will experience the peace that is the fruit of grace: the fullness of life that happens when each member of a community contributes his or her gifts to the others in harmonious communion.

Ephesians 1:2

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus the Messiah.

Paul's prayer for them is that they will remain open to the 'grace', the gift of life that 'God our Father' continues graciously to pour out upon them through 'the Lord Jesus, the Messiah', and that they will know the 'peace' that comes when their whole being and everything they do is full of the harmony that comes from sharing in God's life.

It was Jesus who taught us to relate to God as our 'Father.'

Paul's gospel is that Jesus, in offering himself in love through his suffering and death, fulfils the hopes and dreams invested in the anointed one (the 'Christ', the 'Messiah') whom God promised to send to liberate his people. In the weakness of the flesh Jesus underwent crucifixion, but by the power of the Spirit, he conquered death and is now the one through whom our spirit, too, is made holy through sharing in the intimacy of his communion. Jesus is our 'Lord', for it is in and through him that the God of Moses, the God of the Exodus, the redeeming God is exercising his power to save.

In formal letters such as this it was customary to follow the address with a statement of gratitude. Paul follows this custom, but delays his expression of thanks to verse 15. His heart swells with joy as he breaks into prayer in a sustained hymn of praise (from verse 3 to verse 14). In Greek this is one single sentence, one single movement of adoration. This means that every thought in the hymn is intricately connected to every other thought. No statement is complete till we reach verse fourteen.

The English language cannot support the strain of such a long unit of thought, so I will have to break the sentence up into smaller, more manageable units. We should remember that we are witnessing an intricate symphony of loving adoration and allow ourselves to be swept up into Paul's joyful hymn of praise.

Ephesians 1:3

Praised (Εὐλογητὸς) **be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah, blessing** (εὐλογήσας) **us in the Messiah with every spiritual blessing** (εὐλογία) **in the heavenly places.**

It is clear from the opening word that we are being invited to join Paul in a prayer of praise, praising God for ‘**every spiritual blessing**’: for all the ways in which God has shown and is showing love for us. As in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, our praise is directed to ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah’ (2 Corinthians 1:3). This is the God whom Jesus revealed to us in his words, but especially in his way of loving. This is the God to whom Jesus prayed, the God who is the source of Jesus’ life (his **Father**): the life of communion in love which Jesus now enjoys in glory.

Paul's words remind us of the prayer of Zechariah: "Praised be the God of Israel, for looking favourably on God's people and redeeming them" (Luke 1:68).

At the Last Supper 'Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing ('praising God'), he broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat, this is my body" (Matthew 26:26).

Paul uses three expressions which will be clarified in the following verses. First, the blessings to which the hymn draws our attention are those given us ‘**in the Messiah**’. This is one of Paul’s favourite expressions. It takes us to the essence of the Christian experience.

Secondly, the blessings for which we are praising God are described as ‘**spiritual**’. This prepares us for the climax of the hymn which reads: ‘**You were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of God’s glory**’ (1:13-14).

Thirdly, the blessings are described as being ‘**in the heavenly places**’: the realm of God and the spirits, imagined as being beyond the star-studded sky. The blessings come from God. They also draw us into communion with God’s Son, and so with God.

Ephesians 1:4

God chose us in the Messiah before the foundation of the world

Our attention is drawn to the first blessing for which we are invited to praise God: ‘God chose us’. In verse 14, Paul will speak of the community of Jesus’ disciples as ‘those who are God’s possession.’

It is through the gift of the Spirit that we enjoy communion with God and become God’s special possession (περιποίησις). The promise made through the prophet Malachi is fulfilled in us: ‘They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, my special possession (הִלָּגְתִּי)’ (Malachi 3:17).

Our gaze is directed beyond space and time to contemplate the wonder of God's eternal design, centred on Jesus. It is important to keep reminding ourselves that in God there is no time. The expression 'before the foundation of the world' should be understood as expressing ontological priority, not temporal. Whatever may or may not happen in the realm of history, God has a design for us which transcends everything. Central to this design is that we live our lives 'in the Messiah' – an expression already highlighted in the previous verse.

God's choice is unconditional

‘How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath’ (Hosea 11:8-9).

God's choice is irrevocable

‘The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.’ (Romans 11:29).

We are invited and graced to welcome it

‘You have seen how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.’

Ephesians 1:4

to be holy and blameless in God's presence in love.

We are called, firstly, to be '**holy**'. We are called to live the life of the One before whom the angels bow down in worship: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory' (Isaiah 6:3). We are to be separated from all that is not of God, and belong wholly to God.

To understand holiness properly we must see that only God is holy.

'I am God, the Holy One in your midst' (Hosea 11:9).

The word 'holy' speaks of God's transcendence. The people are told that they may not approach the mountain where God has chosen to reveal himself (Exodus 24:2). For the same reason the tent of meeting is to be pitched outside the camp (Exodus 33:7-11). The inner sanctuary in the temple, the 'holy of holies', is out of bounds for all but the high priest, and even his entry is severely restricted (Leviticus 16:2).

All this changed when 'the Word was made flesh and pitched his tent among us' (John 1:14). In Jesus we see that God wanted us to draw close. Jesus is 'the holy one of God' (Mark 1:24, John 6:69). He is the tent of meeting (John 2:21).

People had always recognised the immanence of God in creation and in history, but those who experienced Jesus came to see that we are drawn into communion with the Holy One not by withdrawal from the body, from the mind, from thoughts and feelings, but by allowing the Holy One to draw us into the heart of the created world where God will transform us. In the light of the Incarnation, we came to the astonishing insight that, in the words of Teilhard de Chardin, God is indeed the 'heart' as well as the 'beyond' of everything.

Jesus also astonished us by showing that this is true of sinners and that we sinners are invited to enjoy God's embrace: 'All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them"' (Luke 15:1-2).

We sinners are called to be in communion with Jesus and so with the Holy One: 'For their sakes I sanctify ['make holy'] myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth' (John 17:19).

'It is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (Hebrews 10:10).

'God's temple is holy, and you are that temple' (1 Corinthians 3:17).

We are made in God's image for God creates us to be in communion with him. God, 'the fountain of all holiness' (Second Eucharistic Prayer) is constantly pouring the Spirit of love into our hearts, drawing us into God's own life and so sharing God's holiness with us. Especially significant for this intimacy are times of prayer when our mind and heart are turned to God in loving attentiveness. It is in prayer that we say Yes to the communion which God is offering us. It is in prayer that we open our souls to receive God's offer of God's Self. It is in prayer that we grow in holiness – a holiness that is expressed in every aspect of our lives.

To be holy is to be in communion with God. It is a communion of the real self with the real God. Since God is love, it is obvious that holiness is intimately related to love.

The Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium, 1964] reminds us that we are all called to a life of holiness: 'The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful. And so it must be. It is expressed in many ways by those who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love' (LG n.43).

Since holiness consists in tending to the perfection of love and since prayer is this experience of being in communion with the all-holy God who is love, the link between prayer and holiness should be obvious. To understand the place of prayer in our lives it is important to understand that we are called and graced to share in Jesus' holiness, and so in the holiness of God.

When we speak of someone as being holy, or when we describe some place as a holy place (a 'sanctuary'), we are not speaking of a characteristic that is inherent in the person or place, or of something that can be acquired by endeavour or discipline. We are not the initiator of any attitude or action that can result in holiness. We are holy to the degree that God, the one who alone is holy, is dwelling in us in a communion of love which is transforming us into an ever more profound participation in the divine life. It is because God, the One who alone is holy, is present uniting us to Himself, that we are living in this divine communion. In prayer we consciously focus on this most profound dimension of our lives. In prayer we become holy.

Jesus was speaking of holiness when he invited the Samaritan woman to drink from the well of his love: 'Drink of the water that I will give you and you will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14).

To grow in holiness we must cooperate with grace. Since God is love, God's gracious initiative comes to us as an offering, an invitation. Since we are created by God and created precisely for this divine communion, the invitation finds an echo in our longing. However, we are free to reject or to accept God's loving invitation. The transformation which we call holiness and which is union with God occurs only to the extent that we welcome God's grace and open our minds and hearts and wills and bodies to the transforming action of God's Spirit - the Spirit of love.

Herein lies the challenge of becoming holy. We have to learn that we cannot initiate holiness. No amount of control exercised by ourselves can produce or achieve holiness. God is holy. God is utterly transcendent, utterly beyond anything we can initiate. God, however, can and does directly act in our lives.

We have to allow the self-as-initiator to be 'lost'. 'If you lose your life for my sake you will find it' (Matthew 10:39). We have to let go control.

We have to become like a little child and allow to happen whatever God wants to happen as a result of His love. 'Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it' (Mark 10:15).

This self-denial is a denial or negating of the self (the ego): ‘If you want to become my followers, you must deny yourself’ (Mark 8:34). It is not a denial or negating by the self. It is allowing God to initiate. It is allowing grace to transform. It is accepting to be loved and to love only insofar as loving flows from the transformation. This requires attentive discipline of our natural tendency to take control. We must resist the temptation to want to ‘possess’ or ‘achieve’ holiness.

This is what it means to be 'poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3). This is what it means to be detached, to be humble. This is what it means to be a child of God. This is what it means to cry out in childlike trust 'Abba!' – a cry that can be made only because the Spirit of Jesus has been poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5).

Saying Yes to God's gracious offer to transform us into God's Self through divine communion, we allow God to penetrate to the heart of our lives, and in so doing discover that God has drawn us to penetrate to the heart of God's life. Prayer is making space for God's transforming action in our lives. Prayer is giving ourselves, like a child, into his hands. Love will lead us along the path of holiness, for Love will take us ever more closely to God's heart.

Jesus is the mediator who shows us how to walk this journey. Through giving us his love, the Spirit of love which he shares with the Father, he draws us to his heart and so to the heart of God. The journey of becoming holy is a journey of being transformed into Jesus: 'All are called to union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and towards whom our whole life is directed' (Vatican II, LG n.3).

'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

God chose us in the Messiah to be holy and blameless in God's presence in love.

Secondly, we are called to be 'blameless'. Who we are is to be expressed in the purity of our lives.

Thirdly, we are called to live our lives 'in God's presence'.

Fourthly, we are told what it means to be holy, what it means to be pure, what it means to live in God's presence and to consecrate our lives to God. In a word, it is to live 'in love'.

'Let all that you do be done in love' (1 Corinthians 16:14).

This is the love of Jesus that is 'poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit' (Romans 5:5),

the love that is the first fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

Ephesians 1:5

God destined [προορίζω] us for adoption as sons for God through Jesus the Messiah, according to the good pleasure of God's will.

The purpose of God's choice is that we share in the life of his Beloved Son. It is because God has adopted us in this way that we are able to be 'holy and blameless before him in love' (1:4). The word 'destined' (προορίζω) is to be understood in the same way as 'before the foundation of the world' in the previous verse. We are invited again to contemplate God's eternal design that transcends all our human purposes and decisions. A special emphasis should be placed on the expression 'for God'. The hymn is highlighting the truth that it is God's desire that we relate to God in this intimate way.

As elsewhere in Paul, the word ‘**adoption-as-sons**’ includes the aspect of sharing the life of his ‘Son’, as well as his inheritance. Romans 8:17).

‘God sent his Son, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

‘If we are God’s children, then we are heirs of God and joint heirs with the Messiah’ (Romans 8:17).

As in both the previous verses, stress is again placed on the fact that this blessing is ‘**through Jesus the Messiah**’.

Ephesians 1:3-5

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah,
blessing us in the Messiah
with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,
for he chose us in the Messiah before the foundation of the world
to be holy and blameless in his presence, in love,
destining us for adoption as sons for God through Jesus the Messiah,
according to the good pleasure of his will.