

## All Saints Day

### Ephesians 1:11–23

<sup>11</sup>In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,[a] having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, <sup>12</sup>so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. <sup>13</sup>In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; <sup>14</sup>this[b] is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

<sup>15</sup>I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love[c] toward all the saints, and for this reason <sup>16</sup>I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. <sup>17</sup>I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, <sup>18</sup>so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, <sup>19</sup>and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. <sup>20</sup>God[d] put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup>far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. <sup>22</sup>And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, <sup>23</sup>which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

#### Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Ephesians 1:11 occurs in the middle of a rather convoluted sentence in the original Greek, in which Paul enumerates the blessings the church has been given in Christ. From v. 3 through v. 14, Paul lists the blessings that have been bestowed already, and those that are still to come. Preachers must realize that they cannot begin their exposition of the text with v. 11 and make sense of the passage. They must look back to v. 3 to discern what Paul is talking about.

Throughout this passage, Paul alternates between what God has accomplished and what is yet to be done. The eschatological element is clear—there is an age which has not yet come (v. 21), but there is no doubt about its coming. The future redemption is more than a hope. It is a certainty, based upon the “inheritance” that is guaranteed by the “seal of the Spirit.” The “seal” might be a reference to baptism, or a more general designation of the various gifts of the

Spirit.<sup>1</sup> There is a distinction between past and future here, but it is not the distinction between past actuality and future possibility. Rather, it is the distinction between two aspects of one actuality: that which has been given and that which is yet to be given. Or, to use the language of Rom. 8: 24–5, the distinction is between that which is seen and that which has yet to be seen. Those who preach on this text must be careful to respect the eschatological emphasis without diminishing its certainty. What Christ has done is continuous with what Christ will do. The “not yet” cannot be reduced to a “perhaps.”

In the first half of chapter one, Paul speaks in the first person plural—“we.” Beginning in v. 15, he switches to the second person—“you.” This raises the issue of who Paul is addressing.

1. Markus Barth argues that the meaning of the “seal” should not be restricted to baptism, but could designate the appointing and equipping of the saints for ministry: Cf. *Ephesians 1–3*, The Anchor Bible vol. 34 (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1974), 135–43.

On the basis of chapter two, it becomes clear that “you” are Gentile converts, while the “we” seems to oscillate between Jews and the totality of the people. There is a logic to this: Chapter 2 speaks of the two peoples, Jews and Gentiles, having become one through Jesus Christ. This reflects Galatians 3:28. It also echoes the principle theme of Romans 11. But whereas the unification in Romans 11 is eschatological, in Ephesians (and Galatians) it seems to be fully realized, at least in principle, because of the work of God in Christ.

In v. 15, Paul turns to his prayer for the Ephesians. This prayer has a double purpose: It is, of course, a prayer, and there is no reason to doubt that this is what Paul prays. But the prayer is also didactic. It teaches the Ephesians how they should be praying, especially how they should be praying on their own behalf. They need the wisdom to understand that which they have received, not simply intellectually, but with their entire being, “the eyes of their hearts.”

Ephesians presents itself as a letter, and it certainly has the formal aspects of a letter, but it lacks the specificity of other Pauline epistles: No recipient is mentioned by name, and no specific situation is discussed. It thus seems closer to Hebrews or James as a general summation of the Gospel, not directed to any particular church or issue, than it is to other letters of Paul. This lack of particularity is one of the factors that has led many scholars to question the Pauline authorship of the letter. Theologically, Ephesians is unquestionably Pauline, whether or not it was written by Paul himself.

In terms of the larger thematic context, the praise of being “in Christ,” (a phrase that, with its cognates, occurs eight times in this chapter) could be said to characterize the entire New Testament in various ways. Here it is connected to being chosen as a part of God’s purpose, the proof of which is demonstrated by the seal of the Holy Spirit, which is likely a reference to baptism. The notion that this constitutes an inheritance is related to Galatians 4: 7, where Paul speaks of members of the church as children and heirs. It is this idea of people who will receive an inheritance as children that marks off members of the church. This is related to Paul’s

discussion of believers as children of Abraham in Romans 4.

The close connection, and occasional duplication, between Ephesians and Colossians, has often been explored by commentators. The so-called “cosmic Christ” of vv. 20–23 is closely related to Colossians 1: 15–20. Both maintain that God has placed the resurrected Christ above all things, although in Colossians there is an emphasis on Christ as the agent of creation that is not in the Ephesians passage. The idea of the church as the body of which Christ is the head is present in both—a theme which receives considerable elaboration in I Corinthians 12. The idea that Christ is both ruler and reconciler of all can also be found in I Corinthians 15: 25–28, although in that passage the rule of Christ will finally be returned to the God. All three passages agree that God working through Christ will accomplish the unification of the cosmos.

Ephesians 1:11–23 is the Epistle reading for All Saints’ Day in Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary. Its accompanying texts are Daniel 7:1–3, 15–18 and Luke 6: 20–31. The psalm is Psalm 149. Of these readings, the passage from Ephesians is the most directly applicable to All Saints Day. It speaks of the church’s election as the first recipient of God’s promises, and the church’s participation in the work of Christ as his body. Psalm 149, one of the so-called “Ladate Psalms,” is a hymn of praise to God, albeit with a somewhat bloodthirsty moment in v. 7. A possible connection between Daniel and Ephesians might be the emphasis on the contrast between fleeting worldly powers and the true, everlasting power of God, which are, by extension, promised for the followers of God (Dan 7:18; Eph 1:21–23). Moreover, the eschatological note in Dan 7:18 points to the triumph of God—a triumph that is given specificity in Ephesians. In this, all three passages look forward to Christ the King Sunday.

The Gospel reading is Luke’s version of the Beatitudes. This is much less well-known than the Beatitudes of Matthew 5, and also rather more grim: It contains condemnations as well as blessings. It is certainly possible to regard the blessings as a description of the authentic church, and the warnings as characterizations of

the church that has abandoned its mission and its Lord. Such an approach could at least mute the triumphalism that can creep into ecclesiological sermons: It is important for Christians to remember that their lives are not simply blessings. There are warnings as well. The church must behave in certain ways if it is not to betray the blessings it has received.

All Saint's Day is often swamped by its proximity to Reformation Sunday in Protestant Churches, but the theme of Reformation Sunday runs counter to All Saints' Day. All Saints' Day is a celebration of the ultimate unity of the church, especially the church on earth and the church in heaven—the church militant and triumphant. Reformation Sunday, while acknowledging the undoubted importance of Martin Luther's publication of the Ninety-five Theses

as the beginning of the Reformation, recalls the division of the Western Church into Roman Catholic and Protestant, a division that remains unhealed.

Ephesians has a crucial place in the New Testament Canon as a summation of the Gospel message in general, and Paul's distinctive interpretation of that message in particular. This particular passage emphasizes all that Christ has given and continues to give to the church—gifts that enable the church's ministry. Those who preach on this text must emphasize both the reality of the gifts and the tasks to which the saints are called. If they are to be truly enjoyed, the gifts must be employed, for that is how the work continues.

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