

The Believer's Heavenly Inheritance

Exodus 34:1–9, Acts 20:32–38

The title of the message this morning is “The Believer’s Heavenly Inheritance.” The word “inheritance” occurs in the last verse of our Old Testament text and the first verse of our New Testament text. In Exodus, Moses prays to the Lord, “pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your *inheritance*” (Ex. 34:9). In Acts, Paul refers to God’s gracious word “which is able to build you up and give you an *inheritance* among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). As we will see, these Scriptures teach us much about our inheritance in Christ.

We come today to the last part of Paul’s address to the elders of the church at Ephesus. As he was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem before Pentecost, he invited them to visit him at Miletus. They willingly came, though it was a 50-mile trip over land and sea, in order to spend quality time with the apostle Paul—to pray together and hear him speak from his heart about important issues of Christian ministry. This was essentially an elders’ retreat—a time to address the subject of pastoral care and the daunting problems that can arise in working with people. As we can see in our text, this was an emotional time for both Paul and the elders. It is obvious that these men had a great deal of affection for one another; they knew that their time together was limited. In our text Paul not only *speaks* about the Christian ministry but *demonstrates* a Christlike concern for even the lowliest members of the flock. There is much here for us to learn particularly from Paul’s example. As we shall see, Paul (1) commends his fellow-elders to the Lord; (2) shows humility, identifying with his fellow-elders; (3) heaps praise upon the Holy Scriptures; and (4) draws attention to the saints’ heavenly inheritance. First, Paul

1. Commends the brethren to the Lord.

Our text begins, “So now, brethren, I *commend* you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up . . .” The word “commend” means *entrust someone to the care or protection of someone*.¹ This is the same word used by Christ on the cross: “Father, into thy hands I *commend* my spirit.”² We are told that “having said thus, he gave up the ghost”—he took his last breath. Our Lord entrusted his spirit to the care and protection of his heavenly Father during the three days and three nights that he would be separated from him in Hades—the eternal Son who had never before been separated spiritually from the Father at any time—having borne our sins in his own body on the tree. The eternal Father and the eternal Son—the first and second Persons of the Holy Trinity, respectively—had enjoyed perfect and unbroken fellowship from eternity past, never disagreeing in any way, never being at cross purposes, never exchanging a hurtful word, never

¹ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich lexicon, παρατίθημι (Logos Bible Software)

² Luke 23:46

experiencing a misunderstanding. But now, voluntarily bearing in his own person the sins of the world, becoming sin for us—he who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him³—he had become odious to the Father, forsaken by him, separated from him who from eternity had nestled him in his very bosom, so that he might accomplish our salvation. It would be three days and three nights before that fellowship would once again be restored, and during that time he would commit his spirit—his human soul—to the Father, for its care and protection. In the same way the apostle Paul entrusted his fellow-elders in the church at Ephesus to the care and protection of the triune God during the prolonged time of his absence. Paul would no longer be able personally to care for the Ephesian church as he had before. He loved those saints and longed to be with them, but in the will and providence of God he would go to Rome to bear testimony for him there. And while he as their father in the faith would no longer be able personally to care for his spiritual sons and daughters, he had utter confidence in the ability of their Father and his to care for and protect them throughout the vicissitudes of life. Their heavenly Father does not lack the power and will to care for his people. Nothing ever takes him by surprise. “Known to God from eternity are all His works” (Acts 15:18). He is the mighty Savior who through the eternal covenant has promised to bring his people at last to himself. Paul would later write, “being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in” his people will continue that work and “complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). Dear saint of God, if you belong to Christ, then even when you are all alone—separated from friends and loved ones, separated from the elders to whom you have entrusted your soul for their spiritual care, separated from any human help—your loving heavenly Father will always care for you. He will never abandon you to the devil. He will always do whatever it takes to protect you and care for you and bring you at last to himself. He has promised, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”⁴ He has given his word and he will not change his mind. Christ was separated from the Father that we, his people, would never be separated from the Father! Such is the love and care God has for us. So Paul says, “brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up.” God is able! Amen! Second, note that Paul

2. Shows humility, identifying with his fellow-elders

Notice that Paul uses the term “brethren.” Even though Paul, an apostle personally chosen by Christ, and an outstanding world-class theologian, outranked the ordinary elders of a local congregation, he puts himself on a level with them and calls them “brethren.” In a similar way Peter, the chief among the apostles and one who had personally traveled with Christ for three and a half years, did this too

³ 2 Cor. 5:21

⁴ Heb. 13:5

in 1 Peter 5:1, calling himself συμπρεσβύτερος, a *fellow-elder*. Our Lord himself likewise called the apostles “friends” (“Henceforth I call you not *servants* ... but I have called you *friends*,” John 15:15). Paul willingly and enthusiastically embraced the elders of Ephesus and called them brethren. He did not in any way desire to lord it over them or make them feel inferior to him. They were a team, committed to a man to the spiritual care of the saints entrusted to their care. They took their responsibility seriously. And so it is today, when faithful pastors vow before God to willingly take charge of a congregation and promise to discharge the duties of a pastor to them, as God shall give them strength, and when the people of the congregation vow to receive the man whom they have called to be their minister, to receive the word of truth from his mouth with meekness and love, and to submit to him in the due exercise of discipline; and when ruling elders, at their installation, publicly vow to “accept the office of ruling elder” in a congregation and “promise, in reliance on the grace of God, faithfully to perform all the duties thereof,” and when the members of a church, “acknowledge and receive” them as ruling elders and “promise to yield [to them] all that honor, encouragement, and obedience in the Lord, to which [their] office, according to the Word of God and the constitution of this Church, entitles [them]”—when pastors, ruling elders and people continue in faithfulness to the vows that they have publicly taken, then all together work as a team and consider one another brethren. There should be no envy or strife within the church of Jesus Christ, for we are all “brethren”—spiritual siblings, members of the same spiritual family. And amazingly our Lord himself, though being Lord of all, holding the most worthy and exalted office in the universe, likewise calls us his “brethren.” As Hebrews 2:11 puts it, “For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them *brethren*.” Is it not evident that our heavenly Father wants us to show humility? Envy and strife are marks of carnality—of fleshly motivation—not spirituality, as Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: “For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?”⁵ How about us? Do we willingly submit to one another as brethren, or do we walk in pride, considering ourselves better and more exalted? As for Paul, he commends the brethren to the Lord. Thirdly, Paul

3. Heaps praise upon the Holy Scriptures

He says, “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” The “word” of God’s grace is the λόγος. This could refer either to the written Scriptures or to Christ, the λόγος incarnate. In the opening words of John’s gospel we read, “In the beginning was the Word [the λόγος], and

⁵ 1 Cor. 3:3

the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This is a reference to the eternal Son who became incarnate and took on human flesh, as is clarified in verse 14, “and the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” The Word—the eternal λόγος, the second Person of the Holy Trinity through whom God speaks—was made flesh. The Scriptures themselves are “the word of Christ” (Col. 3:16). Paul’s phrase “the word of His grace” indeed has a double meaning, referring to the *written* word, the Holy Scriptures which are the word of Christ, or to the *incarnate* word, the Lord Jesus Christ whose Spirit inspired the Scriptures. In either case, this is high praise for the Holy Scriptures. Paul calls them “the word of His grace,” that is, the product of his grace, or they are the Scriptures that teach us of his grace and minister his grace to the faithful. At the beginning of his public ministry our Lord returned to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. He turned to the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.” When he finished reading he sat down and said, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.” Jesus himself was the one on whom the Spirit of the Lord had come. He is the anointed one—the Messiah, the Christ—who had been sent to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to deliver the captives, restore sight to the blind, set at liberty those who are bruised and battered by Satan, and preach “the acceptable year of the Lord,” the time that God had willed and fixed for the redemption of his people. It apparently was not a long sermon, but at the end “all bare him witness, and wondered at the *gracious words* which proceeded out of his mouth.”⁶ Yes, the Holy Scriptures are the word of God’s grace, and Christ is the gracious Savior. God’s people, too, must be gracious and reflect the character of our Savior. We are not to be harsh and judgmental and dismissive of others and vaunt ourselves up, holding ourselves to be the standard of truth and virtue. We dare not take the place of Christ, the Judge of all.

Yes, the Scriptures are “the word of his grace.” Moreover, they are “able to build up” God’s people and give us “an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” Paul indeed heaps praise upon the Holy Scriptures. Fourthly, Paul

4. Draws attention to the saints’ heavenly inheritance

In our text this morning Paul speaks of “the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an *inheritance* among all those who are sanctified.” Likewise in our Exodus text Moses prays to the Lord, “pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your *inheritance*” (Ex. 34:9). Here Moses implores the living

⁶ Luke 4:22

God to take mere creatures for his inheritance. Astonishing condescension, that God Almighty would derive anything of benefit from the creatures of his hand! But Moses' language is inspired. It was God himself that put that particular prayer into his heart, and it is God himself who deigns to regard his elect people as his inheritance. What is an inheritance? It is money or property received as an heir at the death of the previous holder. The word "inheritance" (κληρονομία) occurs fourteen times in the New Testament. It is made up of two parts: κληῖρος, meaning *lot or part*, and νόμος (in its original sense of partitioning, getting by apportionment).⁷ In Bible times it was common to cast lots by marking pebbles, potsherds or small pieces of wood with peoples' names, throwing them together into a vase, which was then shaken, and the person whose lot fell out first upon the ground was the one chosen. There is an apparent reference to this in Psalm 16, which says, "The lines have *fallen* to me in pleasant places; yea, I have a good inheritance." For God to take us as his inheritance means that he would, in the words of Gill, "possess and enjoy, protect and defend, cultivate and improve, keep and preserve [his people] forever." Isn't this what a wise person does with an inheritance? He takes possession of it, enjoys it, protects and defends it, cultivates and improves it, keeps and preserves it. He might receive money or property that, if managed well, would provide him with a comfortable income that would supply his own needs and the needs of his family, but also help him intentionally to "support the weak"—give generously to the needy—as we see in verse 35 (more about this next week). On the other hand, a foolish heir *squanders* his inheritance, like the Prodigal who went into a far country and wasted his substance with riotous living.⁸ In its most exalted sense in biblical use κληρονομία refers to our *heavenly* inheritance: the eternal blessedness of the consummated kingdom of God which will come after Christ's return.

One of my earliest memories took place at the home of my great-grandmother, Grace Wertheimer, who lived in Lima, Ohio. Great-grandmother had made a deep impression on my mother, and I remember our family visiting her several times. She had a deep love for the Lord and took her faith very seriously. For years she taught a large women's Bible class. She had been a widow for over 20 years and was not a woman of means. She did, however, own a large but plain home with a couple upstairs apartments that she rented out, which gave her a small income. I was always fascinated with the metal staircase which led up to the rear apartment, but I wasn't allowed on it because it made noise that bothered the tenant who lived in it. When we ate in her small dark kitchen Great-grandmother prayed over her food and raved about its taste: "Isn't this marvelous! God is so good." When she died, I got a phone call at school and was called to the office; our family left the

⁷ Enhanced Strongs Lexicon, κληρονομία, κληρονόμος, κληῖρος (Logos Bible Software)

⁸ Luke 15:13

next day for the funeral. After the service we went back to her home for one final visit. Family members gathered in the parlor for the solemn reading of the will by a man in a suit who took the papers out of a fine leather briefcase. Great-grandmother's earthly goods were bequeathed to family members, and monetary gifts were given to Christian missions. I was a little disturbed by this, for on my part I just missed my great-grandmother.

The godly man wants to save up so that he can leave an inheritance to his heirs. Proverbs 13:22 teaches that "A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children: and the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just." A wise use of intergenerational wealth can be of great benefit to the building of Christ's kingdom, but the modern state sees it as a threat to its own power. Some governments impose significant inheritance taxes, also known as "death taxes." In one European country, a spouse or a child of a deceased person may be required to pay inheritance tax of up to 30%, whereas a sibling of the deceased may need to pay inheritance tax of up to 65%. If a non-relative inherits wealth, he or she may be required to pay up to 80% to the government.⁹ This is confiscation and a deliberate attack upon the family. Yes, "a good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children," thus glorifying God. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the consummate "good man" who leaves an inheritance to his children's children,¹⁰ ultimately taking us to heaven to live with him permanently. Thank God for the saints' everlasting inheritance!

The other day Norma was asked to bring a hot drink to an activity at the Potter Park Zoo. So she made some hot apple cinnamon spice herbal tea. But how should she transport it to the zoo? I said to her, "That's simple: put it in your coffee carafe; that should keep it hot." But she wasn't so sure. Wasn't it possible that the carafe, with its vacuum-bottle made of glass, might get broken? I was growing impatient. I assured her that if it broke, I would buy her another carafe. But that wasn't the point. She is attached to *this particular* carafe; she cherishes it. I asked why, and she gently reminded me that this carafe was given to her by her mother when she moved into assisted living and would no longer be entertaining people. She gave it to her daughter, and it means a lot to her. In essence, Norma received the carafe as an inheritance, and she wants to guard it because of its attachment to her mother. She wants to protect and defend it, keep and preserve it.

In our text this morning we have seen how Paul commends his fellow-elders to the Lord; shows humility, identifying with his fellow-elders; heaps praise upon the Holy Scriptures; and draws attention to the saints' heavenly inheritance. The "inheritance among all those who are sanctified" is heaven; the saints' inheritance is heaven. The important question is this: Is heaven *your* inheritance? "What shall

⁹ <https://nomoretax.eu/10-jurisdictions-with-no-inheritance-tax/> accessed 12-3-22

¹⁰ טוב ינחיל בְּיָדֵי בְּנָיִם Prov. 13:22

it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"¹¹ What profit is there if you are privileged to hear the gospel, the good news of Christ's salvation, but never receive it, and go to the eternal punishment of the lake of fire at the end? Jesus is the only Savior. There is salvation in no one else. Do you recognize yourself as a sinner with no hope of eternal life apart from Christ? If so, then cast yourself upon his mercy and receive his salvation. Pray to him and say, "Father, I have sinned. I have fallen short of your standard of absolute perfection. I cannot save myself. I recognize that Jesus is the only Savior. I come to you in childlike faith. Please take me and make me your child. Give me a new heart. Enable me to love what you love and hate what you hate. Give me the hope of heaven. I commit myself to you." If that is the prayer of your heart, then confess him before men and become a part of his church—his worshipers. Then you can know that the saints' heavenly inheritance is yours. Amen.

¹¹ Mark 8:36