

Joy at the Dawn!

(Ephesians 1–3)

Possibly the loneliest time is the period of night when all is dark. Anyone who has traveled a lonely road through the night or has sat by the bedside of a loved one who is ill recalls how despairing those long, dark hours were and how slowly they passed. When the first hint of light appeared, the desperation of darkness began to subside. When the sun's bright rays danced along the horizon, comfort replaced the bleakness of night. The light makes everything much better. It is amazing how the dawning of light fills one with comfort. Truly, the dawn shouts for joy (Psalm 65:8b).

The Bible describes the incredible process of conversion to Christ as the dawning of righteousness: Truth's light replaces sin's darkness. Those who do not study, understand, and obey God's law have "no dawn" (Isaiah 8:20). The greatest blessing that mankind has is the opportunity to read and understand God's revealed truth. As individuals read their Bibles, the light of truth dawns in their hearts, dispelling their hopeless existence in darkness.

The new Christian understands the blessing of being "enlightened" by God's truth (see Hebrews 6:4; 10:32). He has come to know, understand, and obey the gospel's commands. When one does these things, a life enlightened by truth replaces a life lived in darkness. He has joy and comfort because light surrounds his soul.

The metaphor of the dawning light illustrates what takes place in conversion. Just as the dawn gradually replaces the darkness, the conversion process slowly brings one to understand the light of God's truth. Just as the light of dawn

replaces fear, the light of God's truth replaces the dread of standing before the righteous Judge as a sinner. God loves all souls and does not want anyone to be lost (2 Peter 3:9, 10; John 3:16–19). God made salvation available when He sent Christ to the earth. Christ sacrificed Himself so that His blood could wash our sins away. How thrilling it is to witness one's coming to understand God's plan of salvation and obeying God's requirements! It is a time of great rejoicing (Acts 16:34). When you came to Christ, the Christians around you were overjoyed! You "turn[ed] from darkness to light" (Acts 26:18), and spiritual blessings now fill your life.

As you begin the Christian life, it is good to review the way you came to salvation. Remember the good news that has saved your soul. Recall the joy of finding the true light of God's truth and the newfound freedom you enjoy after breaking away from sin's darkness.

We will use Ephesians as our basis of study. Paul wrote this letter to encourage Christians in Ephesus to remember their turning from sin's darkness to God's light. The letter reminded the brethren of the divine plan that had brought them out of darkness and into the light of God's truth. Paul also gave practical instructions on what it would mean for them to "walk as children of Light" (Ephesians 5:8). Ephesians is actually a God-inspired guidebook for the new Christian. The epistle's instructions are an excellent source to answer the question "Now that I'm a Christian, what should I do?"

This lesson surveys the first three chapters of Ephesians. In these chapters, the inspired writer

revealed God's plan that redeemed the Ephesians from sin's darkness. This plan is the great doctrine of salvation—the salvation that God designed to be found only in His church. Think with me about how you came to understand God's plan of redemption.

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT: SALVATION IN CHRIST (1:3–23)

God blessed the Christians in Ephesus with His grace. These Ephesians had received the covenant blessing of salvation (3:4–6). The opening section of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians lists the blessings that come into the lives of Christians. (See the listing on this page.) The epistle begins with Paul's usual greeting and then immediately proclaims, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (1:3). These words emphasize the spiritual blessings Christians possess after their salvation.

What did the Ephesians do in order to be saved and become recipients of the grace of God? In 2:8–10, Paul showed that following God's will had saved the Ephesians. They were saved by God's grace. How did this salvation occur? What was involved in their conversion? They took the same steps that God requires from sincere hearts today. When we review what the Ephesians did in order to be saved by God's grace, we will know what people today must do to be saved.

The historical record in Acts 18; 19 and in Ephesians describes the way they were converted. First, they heard the gospel preached (Acts 18:18–21; 19:1–10; Ephesians 1:13). Second, as they listened to the teaching of the gospel, they believed it was the truth of God revealed. This belief (faith) caused them to accept the fact that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God (Acts 19:17; Ephesians 1:13, 15). Third, because of their belief in Christ as God's Son, they turned away from all other religious beliefs. They immediately gave up their erroneous beliefs and stopped practices contrary to God's law (Acts 19:17–20). Fourth, they demonstrated repentance by confessing Christ, the Son of God, as Lord of their lives and were willing to abide by Christ's commands (Acts 19:17b, 18). Fifth, they learned that

in order to be a part of Christ's church (a member of God's family, a saved soul whose sins have been removed), one must be immersed in water, or baptized. Some had been immersed previously, but not according to the baptism that Christ commanded; so they were immersed once again (Acts 19:2–5). The immersion that Christ commanded is for the remission of sins (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15, 16; Acts 2:38; 22:16). Sixth, their immersion placed them in Christ. The phrase "in Christ" (or its equivalent) indicates that the Ephesians were part of the body of Christ. His body is the church (Colossians 1:18). Only those who are in Christ are saved because only those who are in Him have the benefits of the spiritual blessings described in Ephesians. One cannot be in Christ until he or she has done everything the Ephesians did in order to be in Christ.

What blessings did God's covenant of salvation bring to the Christians in Ephesus? They are the same blessings found in the lives of those today who do what the Ephesians did in order to be placed in Christ. Read Ephesians 1:3–23 to see the blessings that are made available to those who are part of Christ's body, the church. The Christian enjoys the following:

- heavenly blessings that far surpass earthly blessings (v. 3)
- the blessing of being God's chosen possession of great value and worth (v. 4)
- the blessing of being an adopted child of God (vv. 5, 6)
- the blessing of having redemption from sins—complete forgiveness (v. 7)
- the blessing of possessing wisdom and understanding of spiritual truths (vv. 8, 17, 18)
- the blessing of possessing the revelation of God's plan for fellowship with other Christians (vv. 9, 10)
- the blessing of the inheritance of heaven's riches (vv. 11, 12)
- the blessing of being sealed by the Holy Spirit (v. 13)
- the blessing of being given the earnest, or pledge, of eternal redemption (v. 14)
- the blessing of loving fellowship with brethren of like faith (v. 15)
- the blessing of focused prayers by con-

cerned brethren (v. 16)

- the blessing of spiritual strength from God the Father (v. 19)
- the blessing of service in the Lord's efforts (vv. 20–23)

Spiritual blessings result because one learns the truth of God's gospel, believes that truth, confesses his or her willingness to submit to the Lord's rule, is immersed for the remission of sins, and lives a steadfast life in devoted faith. These actions place one in the saving covenant of grace! The cherished memories of understanding the gospel plan of salvation and obeying its commands bless one's soul. When a Christian remembers the blessings of the covenant relationship with God, joy drives away the despair of darkness. Constant thanksgiving will result!

FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE: RECONCILIATION IN CHRIST (2:1–22)

Ephesians 2 is one of the greatest chapters in the Scriptures! This chapter describes the process of salvation. It begins by describing the tragedy and hopelessness of those who are lost in the darkness of sin. It then tells how those in that hopeless situation have been offered an avenue of escape. The final verses describe the wonderful life that is lived by those who have turned from the darkness of sin to the light of righteousness. This section of inspired Scripture offers an amazing summary of what happens in conversion. Look how this summary is presented.

First, we see the despair of sin (2:1–12). The section begins by reminding the readers that even though they were in Christ and enjoyed the blessings of fellowship with God, they had not always been so blessed. Before their immersion into Christ, they had been . . .

- dead because of the presence of sin (vv. 1, 5).
- disobedient because they submitted to Satan's control (v. 2).
- devoted to worldly lusts (v. 3).
- damned, or condemned, because they were separated from God (vv. 11, 12).

The tragedy of living in the darkness of sin is shocking. Those living that kind of life are mis-

erable. The Christian remembers this miserable existence and is thankful that God has offered salvation (2:8, 9). Those who hear and obey the plan of salvation become new creations and escape the misery of spiritual death. The despair of sin causes the Christian to appreciate the magnitude of God's salvation. Amazing blessings are offered to those who wish to leave the life of sin.

Second, we see the joy of reconciliation (2:13–18). The misery of sin's darkness is corrected by God's mercy. Those "in Christ Jesus" (v. 13) find themselves in a totally different situation. In order that all people might be saved, God sacrificed His only begotten Son (John 3:16). In that atoning death, Christ brought the prospect of reconciliation to a bitterly antagonistic world. There was enmity between mankind and God because sin had corrupted the blessed fellowship. There was enmity between people because sin had fueled arrogance. Christ came to earth and "preached peace" (v. 17) to a world that was in bitter conflict. Those who hear the gospel story discover the reconciliation that is possible; the war does not have to continue.

In this war, every Christian has been, at one time, an enemy of God. Some deny this truth, but at one time every person who is now a Christian was involved in supporting Satan's efforts to defeat God. When he or she became a Christian, the support formerly given to Satan was shifted to God. How marvelous it is to realize that God forgives us of our enmity and opposition! Christians are blessed because Christ has provided access to God's loving forgiveness.

Third, we see the consecration of belonging to God (2:19–22). Salvation not only replaces the despair of sin with renewal and reconciliation, but it also causes the Christian to become devoted to the Lord's cause. This term means that the Christian is saved by the blood of Christ, is reconciled to friendship with God, and is placed in a special relationship with God. The saved Christian becomes an integral part of the holy temple of God. As a part of this temple, the Christian is sanctified for God's service and joins all the saved. No longer is he God's enemy. No longer does he support opposition to God. Now he works in harmony with other Christians to further the cause of the Lord. What an amazing

contrast we see at this point compared to the point when the person was “dead” (2:1)!

FROM CONFUSION TO CONFIDENCE: ASSURANCE IN CHRIST (3:1–19)

The new Christian has an assurance about spiritual matters. As Paul recounted the conversion of the Ephesians, he reminded his readers that God made it simple for people to be saved. God’s plan of salvation was designed to reconcile man with man and man with God. At one time this reconciliation had appeared hopeless. The plan was vague and confusing (it was a “mystery”; v. 3). This incredible plan was revealed little by little by the Old Testament prophets (Isaiah 28:10). After the death of Christ, the details of this plan were made clear. The apostles and prophets of the first century described the entire process. They wrote down God’s plan so that it could be understood by anyone reading the Bible.

As a new Christian, you can have an unshakable confidence. You know that you have obeyed the will of God. Your obedience has secured you the blessings of salvation detailed in Ephesians 1. This confident assurance guards your heart against Satan’s temptations and urges you to share the good news of salvation with others. As a Christian, you have these assurances:

- wisdom regarding God’s will for guiding your life (v. 4)
- fellowship with other Christians who are dedicated to obeying God (v. 6)
- a share in the “unfathomable riches” of Christ (v. 8)
- a responsibility to spread the Lord’s church (vv. 9, 10)
- a power through prayer to find strength in spiritual matters (vv. 14–19)

Those living in the world cannot find certainty in much. Many become cynical and depressed. The Christian is blessed because salvation provides an absolute confidence in every part of life. As you begin your Christian walk, be aware of God’s promises. In turning from darkness to light, you have found a blessed assurance for the salvation of your soul! This peace means

that Christianity has blessed you with a gift that many would love to possess.

FROM WEAKNESS TO STRENGTH: CONSTANT HELP IN CHRIST (3:20, 21)

These verses urge the new Christian to trust in the power of God. As you begin the Christian walk, you may fear that old temptations will prove too strong and will overpower your recent decision to repent. A new Christian may forget the crucial power of prayer. The closing verses of Ephesians 3 make an unquestionable statement: God is greater than any problem you have! If you trust in God and follow His will in your life, then you will find great blessings.

The new Christian seeks the glory of God *in* the church! You will want to be involved in various works, attend all congregational events, and be committed to building up the Lord’s church (see Ephesians 2:19–22).

A constant help is available to all who struggle to follow God’s commands. Do not become discouraged. Do not forget that God “is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think” (v. 20). The great God who accomplished the awesome things mentioned in the first two chapters of Ephesians is able to be your constant help in living the Christian life.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A church bulletin told a story about a woman who desired a bunch of grapes from the king’s vineyard. This woman had a child who was very ill, and the child yearned to taste the grapes. The mother went to the king’s vinedresser and asked for a small bunch of grapes, but she was rudely sent away. She returned with some money, thinking that the gardener would sell her some grapes, but again she was crudely rebuffed. The king’s daughter overheard the harsh words of the gardener and the pleading of the mother. The princess walked up to the mother and asked what she wanted. The mother explained her circumstances and her desire to have a few grapes for her sick child. The king’s daughter listened and then said, “My dear woman, you are mistaken to believe that my father would ever sell the grapes to you. He is not a merchant, but a king; his business is not to sell, but to give.” The princess then picked a large bunch of grapes

from a vine and gave it to the mother. The mother obtained as a free gift what she was unable to secure in any other way.

The Father in heaven has provided escape from sin's misery. We can leave behind the ignorance and shame of a darkened misunderstanding and find the joy of an enlightened understanding of the Lord's will. Indescribable joy comes into the hearts of those who understand that the

great God in heaven loves us and seeks to be in fellowship with us. This blessing is available and is freely offered (Revelation 22:17). What a glorious blessing! The only requirement is willingness to read (or listen), study, understand, and obey.

Let us thank God that the light of the dawn drives away the fear and hopelessness of the darkness.

John L. Kachelman, Jr.

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