

The Guarantee

Ephesians 1: 11-14

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There were witches in the trees. That's what I thought as a child. My room had a door that led to an upstairs porch. Further out was the grass, then the trees between our house and the next. Before we had air conditioning, my parents would open the wooden door to the porch so the breeze could come in. Only a screen door was between me and whatever was out there. Witches were in the trees.

That's a child's imagination wondering what's out there. But that curiosity and fear does not leave us as we grow older. It just changes form. *What's out there?* In the air. Between me and the burning stars. Sometimes in our lives, we try on the idea that there is *nothing* out there. Nothing in the air. Just what you see is what is. An unguided process led to this. It has no goal, no purpose, no morality. The stars are indifferent. Whatever meaning there is, we make it up. I've tried that on. It's worse than witches. Just sheer nothingness. Just the struggle that always ends in defeat. We are, and then we are no more. It's hardly worth living.

For many people in the world, *ancestors* are out there. Those who came before us. They left us high standards and expectations to which we must live up. Others left a legacy of betrayal and violence we have to strive not to repeat. But either way, they are out there. Always watching. Always noticing how we perform.

For many others, the air is populated with *invisible spirits*. They might be at war with each other. They might get pleasure out of hurting us or protecting us. You can't know when they'll show up or what might happen to you. As a teenager I was often frightened that the devil might get me, might tempt me into the unforgiveable sin. For the people in Ephesus, the spirits in the air were dangerous. The people sacrificed to certain gods to protect them from other gods. But they were never quite sure which god would get the upper hand. Anything could happen. And to their eyes, the way accidents, violence, illness and tragedies occurred, it seemed completely chaotic and therefore unnerving. We may not name

the gods the way they did, but we understand the Ephesian fears. After all, we hurtle along at 70mph next to people who are texting after a sip from a drive through daiquiri. We seem to be pawns to be manipulated by the algorithms of powerful companies. We do not expect that the government has our best interests in mind. Anything could happen, and does.

What a story this odd little man named Paul came to tell. With an astoundingly high level of conviction, he declared that there is a purpose running straight through from the dawn of time to the very end. There is an indomitable will that runs through the cosmos. A personal power that will not be thwarted no matter what. So Paul would write of the one he called Christ Jesus the Lord,

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

Hear it the way the Ephesians would have heard it. Hear it when it feels like what's in the air itself is hostile to you. Hear it when uncertainty about the future takes your breath away. Hear it when there are witches in the trees, monsters under the bed, and an enemy in the next cubicle. In Christ, we have a future. Paul calls it a glorious inheritance. What's more, that future has picked us up along the way to its fulfillment. The purpose of God began before you were created. You were loved before you're made. And that love has entered the world on the way to a radiant future. It flows from the One who sources everything. The One who directs the flow so that even what is horrible will in the end be worked to good. He will turn burnt out ashes into shimmering beauty. That indomitable will, that unfailing love, has picked you up and included you. Nothing and no one can separate you from that love, that will, that God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We are going to inherit everlasting life in a renewed heavens and earth. But this love works two ways. Paul says that we who hope in Christ will be "to the praise of *his* glory." How could *we* adorn the glory of the God who conceived and created all things? God is already glorious. That's just how God is on an ordinary day. But an extraordinary day is coming. God's going to get duded up. He's going to go to his treasure case and pull out some jewels to wear. They are going to display to creation the beauty of God. These jewels are the saints, the believers, the people Christ has saved and cleansed. The ones he has

picked out of the pit and shined up in Jesus. The redeeming work God is doing in you causes you to become a treasure to him.

We will inherit eternal life in communion with God and one another. God will inherit communion in his beloved saints that grows in glory through the ages. And your participation in this future is guaranteed by the character and power of the one true God.

So don't worry about the witches. Don't fear the ancestors, either being scorned by them or disgraced by them. Don't worry about the blind fates weaving your destiny. Or the "universe" sending you into nothingness. Don't worry about the powers on earth that can send suffering now. Even that pain will be transformed into glory. What news this would have been to people laboring under the fear that they were just pawns before powers beyond them.

How did the Ephesians get in on this story? How do we? Paul reminds them of when they first heard the word of truth, the good news of their salvation. He told them the story. A true story. The story of the eternal God entering the world as one of us in order to save us. The Ephesians believed him. And nothing was ever the same. When Paul wrote to the Romans, he explained it, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the Word of God." The story is told. A miracle occurs. We believe. And we become a new creation. We begin to say to all the hostile powers of the air and the world, "Jesus Christ is Lord. God raised him from the dead. I belong to him and you can't get me. I'm alive because he's alive."



I'm not sure I could overstate how powerful is the series about Jesus and his disciples called *The Chosen*. Early in season one, Jesus delivers Mary Magdalene from the disintegration and degradation caused by bondage to an evil spirit. He sees her in distress. He calls her by her true name. He claims

her allegiance. Later, the Pharisee named Nicodemus sees Mary looking healed, alive and restored. He asks her to explain what happened. With all humility and love, she says to him simply, "I was one way, and now I am completely different, and the thing that happened in between was Him."

This is the testimony that runs through the ages and around the world. I was one way and now I am another. What happened is Jesus. You heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed. It changes everything. And it's happening all the time. It happens when we come out of darkness and into the light for the first time. It happens all through our Christian lives when God calls us to release something to which we are clinging that is not him. He beckons us to believe the gospel of our salvation, and to let it go. And when we do, he fills us with himself.

For the last few years, we've been asking our new deacons and elders to write what Jesus has meant in their lives. Some have been Christians since childhood. Some came to Christ out of a different religion or no religion. Some quiet, some dramatic. Each one is unique. But as a whole, reading these twenty testimonies each year fills me with joy. Here are the jewels in God's treasure house, getting shined to adorn his glory. I love that we now have women's testimony night. I wish I could have heard the moving stories of five women from our church that were shared last Thursday. The gospel, shared in love and nurtured in community, still transforms lives. You might want to take some intentional time to write a few paragraphs about how this happened in your life. Take Mary's words and apply them. "I was one way, and now I am completely different, and the thing that happened in between was Him." Perhaps then you'd like to share that story with someone else. But should you feel like there is no story, call one of us pastors and let's talk about it.

Now finally, we lift up the quiet, powerful person involved in this miracle of belief. Paul says that when you heard and believed, you "were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." The Holy Spirit has been called the humble member of the Trinity. He doesn't call attention to himself. He desires to shine light on Jesus the Son. And to connect us through Jesus to the Father. The blessed Spirit is the one who enables us to hear the gospel story as a personal word to us. The Spirit is the one who opens our blind eyes to see who Jesus is. He brings us to faith. He loosens our tongues so that we can say to the Almighty God of all, "Abba! Father."

For the Spirit comes to dwell in the hearts of all those who believe and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. It is normal Christian experience to feel the Spirit inside us. He gives us the sense that in this vast universe we are not alone. We are companioned. We belong. We have been included in the great purpose of God's will to love and save the world.

Paul says that the Holy Spirit *seals* us in Christ. Seal is a great word and it worked two ways back in Paul's day. And it works two ways for us. A seal is the official imprint of someone. A notary seal guarantees that the signature on the document is authentic. A seal impressed on a book declares ownership. So the Holy Spirit is God the Father's stamp in us that we belong to him through Jesus Christ. But also, a seal protects something. The safety seal on your Tylenol bottle tells you that the pills have not been tampered with. The seal protects. So the Spirit inside us keeps us believing, protects us from spiritual attacks. He seals us into Jesus so that we cannot be snatched away. We cannot be lost.

Finally, Paul says that the Spirit is the *guarantee* of our inheritance in Jesus. More literally, the Spirit is the down payment. He is the earnest money of all that is to come. How glorious will the future be? Just think of the riches that are in Christ's down payment on our future. We the Spirit of Christ himself:

- The one who makes us feel the forgiveness of our sins through his atonement.
- The one who gives us the peace that passes understanding when we go through trials.
- The one who gives us joy in worship.
- Who creates deep bonds of love between believers.
- The one who enables us to hear God himself when we read the Scriptures.
- The one who lights up our days with purpose.
- The one who includes us in Christ's mission to the world.

The experience of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christ's people is our most priceless possession. The Spirit is Christ's pledge of love to us.

If you are outside of Christ, this all sounds ridiculous. If you have been long in spiritual desolation, this sounds like a distant memory. If you have been stubbornly holding onto unconfessed sin, this feels very far removed. If you are holding out on releasing something to God, this makes you sad, because you can't feel God right now. But all that can change.

Let the Spirit do his work. He convicts us. He tugs at us. He urges us to believe the gospel and surrender our lives to Jesus anew. It is a simple release that costs everything to which we cling, which always turns out to have been nothing that matters. You have been called to be a jewel that adorns the glory of Christ who died and rose to save you. You have an inheritance waiting. Will you claim it? Claim it by letting Christ claim you?