

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Trusting God: Earnest, a Future Inheritance and a Rich Present

In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:11-14)

We continue our examination of this rich passage. At the core of historical theological study lies a central question. What does belief in Christ produce? Does it cause the new birth? Does it begin the trek down a human-centric salvation, initiated by God but dropped mid-stream for man either to complete or lose?

On one hand we see belief in Christ misappropriated from something that glorifies God into something that magnifies man. On the other hand we see either what contemporary Christian thinkers have labeled "easy decisionism" in criticism of their own theology. The leading "evangelical" personalities often conduct mass crusades in which they preach a man-centric gospel, followed by an emotional plea for anyone who has not initiated his own salvation to walk down to the podium or sign a card pledging to "give your life to Christ." Typically they will define such trivial actions as the road to salvation, in their mind a road engineered by God, but then left for man to build by his own initiative, will, and work. On the other extreme you will occasionally see folks who so devalue belief in Christ that one would hardly think it worth anything of value to anyone, so why bother? I offer that all of these attitudes toward belief fail the New Testament description of belief in Christ, the foundation for trusting Him. Since the apostles and many other Christians in the first generation of New Testament Christianity willingly gave their lives for their faith in Christ, we must conclude that they placed an incredibly high value on Him and on their trust in Him. Clearly they believed that, even in death, He would not disappoint their solid trust in Him. For them there was no alternative to wholly trusting in Christ and walking in His steps (John 6:68).

In our study lesson Paul leads us through a Christ-centric view of our salvation directly into a subsequent life of equally Christ-centric living that includes trusting in Him.

We will examine two analogies in the passage that focus on the blessings of faith and trust in Christ.

1. "[Y]e were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise." What is the significance of being "sealed"? First century Roman culture did not have "Certified mail" or other secure courier services that took sealed envelopes over hundreds of miles from sender to recipient. Documents were written on typically bulky media, often in scroll form and sent by a known and trusted person to the recipient. How could the sender know that the document would reach its intended recipient, but remain unread and unaltered by the courier? Especially official documents, but often other important documents, were sealed over the lip of the scroll with a piece of melted wax. While the wax was still soft and warm, the sender would imprint his official signia into the soft wax. If the wax seal was unbroken when the document was delivered to the recipient, he would know that it had been delivered unaltered. The seal didn't contain or create the important message in the document. It served to validate the authenticity of the document upon arrival. In this analogy Paul equates our belief in Christ with the seal of His blessing to us. When we come to the knowledge and belief of the gospel, we realize the authenticity of God's salvation. Our belief in Christ no more causes our eternal salvation than the seal caused the document to be written. Validation of authenticity is the

function of the ancient seal. Paul extends the same idea to our trust in Christ.

2. *Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession.* Paul draws from another ancient custom to further enrich our thoughts regarding our blessings in Christ, as confirmed by our trust in Him. In fact property attorneys still use the term “earnest” in real estate dealings in our time. Strong defines the Greek word translated earnest, “...money which in purchases is given as a pledge or down payment that the full amount will subsequently be paid.”¹ Few people carry enough cash in their pockets to pay immediately for a piece of real estate, something of significant value. How do they secure the property till the necessary steps for full payment and taking possession of the property can occur? They deposit a down payment in escrow or with some trusted resource till the full transaction is completed. This money must be of significant value to convince the seller that the buyer intends to complete the transaction, that he is not frivolous in his intentions to purchase the property. Paul draws from this ancient custom to enrich our thinking regarding the reality of our eternal standing with Christ, a standing that will not be completed till He “redeems” our bodies from death in the final resurrection. How do we know that He intends to complete the purchase transaction? We know it by the witness of the Holy Spirit’s “seal” on our belief. God will not give assurance to anyone not included in His eternal saving purpose and work. Does this mean that everyone who claims to believe in Christ is saved? That everyone who claims to be a Christian is saved, even when their life shames the name of Christ? No, it does not. What Paul is dealing with in this passage is a private transaction between God and His child alone, not a public profession or storefront image. The passage does not license us to put brands on other people either denying or certifying their salvation. Such an attitude is an arrogant supplanting of the Holy Spirit’s work with frail human folly.

¹James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed., G728 (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship., 1996).

The whole process that Paul describes grows out of the inner work of God in the soul of His people. The gospel no more puts that saving work in the soul than the seal writes the legal document. However, the incredible value of the gospel and of a profound, life-changing trust in Christ appears clearly in this lesson. We are the recipient of the official document, not the author. *We are the possession being purchased, not the buyer.* The Holy Spirit enriched Paul’s message to the Ephesian church with these words to assure us of God’s serious design to complete what He began without loss or failure.

The idea of salvation by human cooperation with God contradicts this lesson. It makes man the writer of the document and the buyer of the property, reducing God to the role of the neutral escrow company that holds the down payment till completion of the saving transaction.

What is the value to you and me of trusting in God? In the midst of every disappointment that life can foist upon us, in the heat of the struggle for meaning and purpose, we may joyfully claim God’s eternal design as the answer to life’s major focus. Our reason for being is not to discover ourselves, or develop a “positive self-image,” or any number of other self-serving ideas that always tend to put man in the center of the universe and God on the convenient outer edge. Paul leads us gently but clearly to the final conclusion of God’s design for us, “*unto the praise of his glory.*” My Christian life, my ministry, my service to God and to His people—my ultimate goal—is not personal gain of any kind or sort, but rather to praise God for His glorious work on my behalf.

Without doubt everyone redeemed by God’s “redemption of the purchased possession” (Do you see the clear indication that the actual price in full has already been deposited in escrow; that the only thing remaining to complete the transaction is for Him to take possession of what He already purchased?) shall praise His glory in eternity. Our trust in Him empowers us to praise His glory now instead of seeking our own interests or glory. Regardless of your ministry, its only legitimate objective is to praise His glory. *To Him be the glory!*

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
Joseph R. Holder Pastor