

“Flares in Our Dark Sky ”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

First in a series on Ephesians

Ephesians 1.1-14

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Step into a cloudy night, and you don't see much. But your eyes adjust. Soon you can make out shapes and figures. Spend the whole night out, and you get used to it.

Suppose, though, this is darkness of a different, terrible sort. A night waiting for a dawn that never comes. This darkness is a blanket without end, a thickness wrapping round. We learn to cope with the dark, to adapt. We might forget what daylight is like. If we are born into this darkness, then of course we know no difference. We have no idea what we are missing, what is hidden without light to show it.

II

Leave your imagination now, and think of what you really see when you look around. Not just with your eyes, but with your understanding, your experience. What do you see?

So much is good to see, right! If you've come this morning with a strong sense of that goodness, hold onto it. Today's Scripture is for all of us, but maybe particularly helpful for us who are trying to see in the dark.

Maybe you look around and see broken branches, reminders of nights in the dark cold. You were literally powerless. A few hours was an adventure, then an inconvenience. But days of it . . . I've talked to people who were wiped out and frightened. Now we know. Things are not as secure as we thought. We are precarious.

Or, maybe you just want to close your eyes, because you're tired of seeing. I don't want to see another story of civil war or disaster far off, which I cannot help. Or another calamity that is too close to home. And I'm sick of scandals.

Or, maybe you look through weary eyes. I know some of you have had one piece of bad news landing on your doorstep after another. Your arms are full. You're carrying a load, and tripping over your own feet.

We grow used to living under the dark blanket of night. I can make out some things that encourage and cheer me – so much is good! Yet also, things that worry me. Still, it's what I cannot see, what might be there, that scares me most.

Peering into the dark, trying to make things out, gets tiring.

Are you tired?

III

Our Bible reading, which starts this letter to the Ephesians, is a series of flares, fired into our dark sky. They burst and blaze, casting light all around. So we can see. What we see has always been there. But now, with these words, we can see it. The darkness changes. For what we now see is good, very good.

As _____ said, these 14 verses are just two sentences. The first is okay, a standard greeting from Paul to the Ephesians.¹ But the second sentence is some 201 words long. One scholar said it is *“the most monstrous sentence conglomeration . . . I have ever met in the Greek language.”*² Most translators, bringing it into English, have mercy on us and break it up into manageable sentences with good grammar. I kept it long and unwieldy. Because it ain’t about doing grammar good!

It is about praise, celebration, breathless joy. It’s the child who’s rushed to you, to tell about his day. It’s the newly betrothed, flashing her finger and spilling out how it all happened. It’s ripping open the envelope and reading the letter you’ve been waiting for. Paul’s got stuff to say, and it just pours out. No stopping for periods. Not even braking for semi-colons. The most he’ll concede is a comma, here and there, to draw in more air, before the next explosion of light. We are living under this darkness, and Paul gives us this sentence of flares.³ He fires them into the sky to show us things we were not seeing.

IV

I’m going to point to four of them, four blazing lights that can finally help us see what’s always been there.

¹ There is quite a scholarly debate over who the real author was, and whether it was sent to Ephesus originally. Whether it was Paul, or Paul collaborating with others, or someone close to Paul carrying on his legacy by writing in his name . . . for simplicity, I’ll just say Paul. And whether it was to Ephesus, or the region that included the city, or whether Ephesus was the city where it originated . . . for simplicity, I’ll just say it was to the Ephesians. What matters is not so much who wrote it, nor to whom, but the One whom the letter is all about, and what it says to us today.

² E. Nordon, quoted in Eugene H. Peterson, Practice Resurrection: a conversation on growing up in Christ (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 53.

³ Peterson calls these “seven verbal rockets.” (p. 57) I’m focusing on four.

Blessed. *“Bless God, the Father of our Master Jesus the Messiah, who has blessed us in him with every spiritual blessing. . . .”* (verse 3)

God blesses you. God’s very nature is to bless. God blesses because that is who God is.

We are living under the shroud of this night sky, and we’ve been imagining that whatever we cannot see is a curse, because it’s in the dark. But now we see that God blesses. The very fabric of God’s cosmos is blessing. God’s blessing becomes our map. God’s blessing becomes our compass.⁴ God’s blessing becomes the light we travel by, when it is dark.

Another flare fired into the sky: **chosen.** *“ . . . in love God chose us . . . and predestined us to be adopted for himself through Jesus the Messiah. . . .”* (verses 4-5a)

“Choosing” can have a narrow sense. Some get chosen and some do not. But here, the sense is expansive. Being chosen gets us out of any notion that life is random, without meaning. God chooses you. God intends you. On purpose!⁵

Even more, God predestines you. Again, that can have a narrow sense, with everything fated and pre-planned. We do better, though, to think of it in the sense of a destination. You are going somewhere. The Greek word comes from a root that means a boundary.⁶ You are not left to your own, to find your way through the endless darkness. God makes a path and guides you along. God has given you a life with direction to it.

Being chosen, being destined is not some cold calculation. Notice the word “adoption.” When you are adopted, you are brought into relationship. God chooses you, God destines you for adoption through Jesus into God’s family.

Blessed. Chosen. Now, another flare: **delivered.** *“ . . . we have deliverance through Jesus’ blood – that is, the forgiveness of sins – according to his rich grace, which he lavished on us. . . . ”* (verses 7-8)

Delivered. Jesus sets you free. You are free from shame, free from oppression, free from

⁴ Peterson writes, “. . . bless is map and compass for finding our way through the country.” (p. 57)

⁵ This carries “a sense of intention. Life is not random.” Peterson, 59.

⁶ Ibid. *Prooridzo* is from the root *oros*.

the dark corners of your past you'd rather keep in the dark. That stuff does not make you who you are any more. Jesus has delivered you, and brought you into a new story, a new history, a new relationship.⁷

Has he done this reluctantly, miserly? No! The freedom Jesus gives, he gives lavishly, abundantly, unendingly.

One more flare: **gather**. This is all God's ". . . *plan for when the time was ripe, to gather up all things in the Messiah, everything in the heavens and on the earth in him . . .*" (verse 10)

God blesses, chooses, delivers, and much more, to gather all things. Everything scattered, broken, conflicted. Everything lost in the darkness. What is scattered, God is bringing back together. What is broken, God is restoring. What is conflicted, God is reconciling. What is lost, God is finding.

We'll see this again and again, throughout Ephesians. Paul shining light so we can see in the darkness. And God gathering things together.

V

One last thing, of first importance. Gather, deliver, choose, bless – these are verbs, action words, things that get done. None of them is for you to do. God is doing them. As Eugene Peterson says, "*we are out of the driver's seat forever.*"⁸ God is doing what needs to be done. These are not for you to do.

Yet every one of them – gathering, delivering, choosing, blessing – is about you, each one includes you. You're not a bystander. You, and all of us, are part of what God is doing.⁹ So we are not passive. We are involved. Looking. Seeing. Following. Receiving.

Rejoicing! For it is dark. But now you can see what is going on in the dark. God is doing things! So the dark looks different. Let's keep on celebrating! Amen.

⁷ Timothy G. Gombis, [The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 76.

⁸ Peterson, 68.

⁹ Ibid.