

The Whole Enchilada
Sermon on Ephesians 1:3-14 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, July 16, 2006

I wonder if the phrase “the whole enchilada” makes sense anywhere outside the American southwest. For instance, absent the nationwide expansion of Taco Bell, I just can’t imagine the folks in Wisconsin or Rhode Island using it in conversation. The whole kit and kaboodle, maybe, or certainly the whole nine yards. And in the fashionable salons of London and Paris, you might invoke “everything from soup to nuts.” But if Texans want to refer to something that includes everything from beginning to end, we talk about the whole enchilada. And though I doubt that St. Paul hailed from these parts, today he gives us the whole enchilada.

As we all know, enchiladas are a kind of casserole in a tortilla, smothered in sauce and baked to perfection. You can have anything and everything in your enchilada: beef, chicken, cheese, seafood, vegetables, or beans, garnished with diced or sliced onions and grilled cheese, lettuce, olives, jalapenos, and fresh cilantro. You can choose chili sauce, tomatillo sauce, or sour cream. The truly hungry, then, want the whole enchilada. I use the term only with great caution, given that we are talking here about the mystery of salvation, but somehow this Tex-Mex staple seems an apt illustration of what Paul is up to in the text from Ephesians. We should remember what they say in the restaurants of Mexico City, however: “*estas no son enchiladas*”—literally, these are not enchiladas. This is not simple stuff.

That God’s great gift of salvation is not simple stuff is nicely illustrated by the fact that Ephesians 1:3-14 is actually one long sentence in Greek. The sentence forms a blessing, a prayer of praise and thanksgiving. That one sentence consists in relative clauses, subordinate clauses, prepositional phrases, synonyms, and parallelism. Paul uses that abundance of words and phrases to illustrate grammatically just how rich is the treasure God offers us in Jesus Christ.

The problem may be recognizing that we have a problem. I went to see “Superman Returns” the other day. In this latest installment in the story of America’s greatest superhero, Clark Kent returns after a five-year absence only to find that life, the world, and Lois Lane have moved on. Lane, his erstwhile romantic interest, has written a Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial called “Why the World Doesn’t Need Superman.” Despite being rescued from a crashing plane, the ace reporter and single mother rather pointedly tells Clark, “The world doesn’t need a savior, and neither do I.” Of course, she says that before she and her son are held prisoner on Lex Luthor’s yacht, which breaks apart and starts to sink, threatening to drown the young family.

And that is our situation, too: trapped, imprisoned, held hostage by a dark and malevolent force that we call sin. Like Lois, who tries to cry and claw and force her way out of her watery prison—all to no avail, we seek to escape the bondage of sin. Despite our good thoughts and good intentions and good works, however, guilt and shame for our sin flood the broken craft of our lives. As humans, we are bonded over, consigned to suffer death. Despite our diet and exercise, despite good choices and healthy living, the accident happens, the cancer recurs, the illness can’t be treated. Like John the Baptist in Herod’s cell awaiting his executioner, we need someone who can rescue us, not from the reality but from the power, of death. The truth is that we *do* need a savior—someone stronger than the evil arrayed against us, someone more powerful than death, someone motivated to act on our behalf by love. We don’t need Superman; we need Jesus, the Son of God, Savior of the world.

Thanks be to God, God had a plan to send him. The curious, but very great, thing about the plan is that it wasn’t occasioned by our need. The plan didn’t depend on our merit. The plan didn’t require our planning or approval. The plan has been God’s all along, and it is all owing to God’s grace.

That plan, that rescue mission, the plan to save us from slavery to sin and bondage to death, calls for our praise and thanksgiving. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” says the writer of Ephesians, “who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love” (1:3-4). Of course, those who don’t think they need a savior don’t see the need to worship God and can’t see a reason for thanksgiving and praise. But the ancient church father, Jerome reminds us that, “we are captives in this world and bound by the yoke of slavery to the principalities and powers, unable to release our hands from our chains.”¹

But God sent Jesus his Son into the world to release the prisoners, to set the captives free. Ephesians tells us that, “In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us” (7-8a). Jesus comes to our rescue. Through his death on the cross, we have redemption through his blood. Jesus saves us. Through his death on the cross, we receive the forgiveness of our trespasses. And all of this is “according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.” St. John Chrysostom says this rescue is reason for praise, and “The wonder is not only that [God] gave us his Son but that he did so in this way, by sacrificing the one he loved.”²

That is what is so amazing about grace: God freely chooses it. Just as John Wesley defined sin as a person’s voluntary and willful violation of a known law of God, so we might define grace as God’s voluntary and willful act of forgiveness, pardon, and mercy. That loving and gracious act by which we are restored to a right relationship with God happens because God chooses to restore us to our place in God’s family. That we have a place in God’s family at all is itself an act of grace, freely and gladly chosen by God.

¹ Jerome, *Epistle to the Ephesians I.I.7* in *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture New Testament vol. VIII, ed. Mark J. Edwards (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 107.

² John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians I.I.8* in the work cited above, p. 108.

It seems that making a place for us in his family, like saving us, is the very nature of God. This God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has “blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing” (v. 3); he “chose us in Christ ... to be holy and blameless before him” (v. 4); he “destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ” (v. 5). The blessing of God is God’s saving activity in Jesus Christ—God choosing us, destining us for adoption, calling us his children, redeeming us, granting us an inheritance. And like any kind and loving father, God the heavenly Father does these things “according to the good pleasure of his will” (v. 5). Again, this is grace, for it is by God’s good pleasure, by his favor, that he fulfills his will, what Andrew Lincoln calls his “active resolve [and] redemptive purpose.”³ Marius Victorinus says, “All this is therefore to the praise of his glory and grace—[God’s] glory because he can do so much, and his grace because [God] offers this to us freely.”⁴

Friends, the reality of the world—riddled as it is by war and armed conflict, beset as it is by chaos and lawlessness, burdened as it is by poverty and illness—is that we need a Savior. The reality of our lives—enslaved to sin, held hostage by guilt, plagued by temptation—is that we need to be rescued. The reality is that the Savior has been sent, that the rescue operation has been launched. Our salvation, our forgiveness and pardon and our inclusion in the family of God, was secured by Christ at the cross of Calvary. That is the mystery of God’s will, that you and I and all the sinful world will be gathered up in Christ, saved by the gracious action of a loving God.

The church father Theodoret says, “[God] has conferred on us the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He has given us the hope of resurrection, the good news of immortality, the promise of the kingdom of heaven, the dignity of sonship.”⁵ Election, redemption, adoption, salvation. God freely, willingly, and lovingly saves us and makes us his own. That is the whole enchilada.

Thanks be to God.

³ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Publishing,) 26.

⁴ Marius Victorinus, *Epistle to the Ephesians 1.1.(4) 5-6* in *G, E, P* ed. Edwards, p. 106-107.

⁵ Theodoret of Cyr, *Epistle to the Ephesians 1.3* in the work cited above, p. 104.