

Every year the press reports the names of the Ten Richest People in the world and tells briefly how they have made their fortunes. Most of us can barely conceive what it would mean to win the state lottery; but the wealth of those lucky ticket-holders looks tiny when laid beside the earthly assets of the world's Top Ten.

God also announces in his Word who the richest people in the world are, and guess what: It's us. You knew that, of course, for you just heard the Apostle Paul declaring in this morning's Epistle that God has blessed us in Christ with

...every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm.

Nothing on earth, after all, can compare to the splendors of heaven, and God has bestowed on us the greatest treasure to be found in heaven. This divine fortune has been given to us already in part; and just as it came from heaven, a great part we stand to inherit only in the

world to come. No matter poor someone is, God offers it freely as his gift through faith in his Son, the Word Made Flesh.

Have you noticed that I have not yet stated what this stupendous blessing is? Before going there, let's imagine that some billionaire shows up at your door and says, "I have decided to let you share in my riches, and you get to choose one of three options. First, you may choose a one-time, tax-free gift of \$800,000. Or, if you so choose, I will see to it that every medical expense that you incur, large or small, is paid for over the next twenty-five years. Third, I will build you a house anywhere you want in the world, and there you may live without any utilities to pay or any upkeep expenses."

The point is that people set values on things in different ways, not merely by cash value but also by what they value most. Game shows, for example, are notorious for granting third-place winners 500 boxes of macaroni, or a lifetime supply of toothpaste. A man who has no eyes will not thrill at winning a pair of binoculars.

The Lord God has not promised us a treasure undefined, neither do we get to specify the kind of riches we prefer. Instead, he simply offers that which all humans most need to receive – which is, when you get down to it, life itself. Here we come to the great Mystery that no one could ever have reasoned out, but which the Lord revealed to Saul of Tarsus – that even before he formed the galaxies, our Creator determined a course of human history that would culminate in his sending to earth his redeeming grace in the person of his Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

What God decreed before time even began, Christ Jesus then accomplished at that culminating moment when he spent three hours of his life nailed to a Roman cross, where he poured out his blood in order to set us free and secure our inheritance:

...redemption, the forgiveness of our trespasses.

But what will this offer mean to someone who does not even believe in God? Obviously nothing. What will "God's free forgiveness of your sins as long as you live" mean to someone who believes in a god they have fabricated in their own mind, who believe in a god who never condemns anyone, and that everybody goes to

heaven?

Such is the saddest event that ever occurs on earth: The man who came among us as the lowly Galilean child of Mary is worth infinitely more than the fortunes of the Ten Richest People put together, goes through hell to rescue mankind. He pours out his riches, his very life, in a gruesome death for our sins, in order to open for us the gates of heaven. But when people hear the news all that he has done, it means nothing to them. People despise the message of their only hope, because they cannot look beyond their own stomachs or stop comparing their lives to those of their neighbors. Many of them still think the greatest improvement in their life would come through winning the state lottery.

I am not going to dwell any further, however, on the way countless men and women tragically refuse God's gift of his sin-forgiving and life-redeeming grace. And the reason I shall not dwell on them is this: In the Lectionary series that we are presently following, today features the first of eight consecutive Sunday readings from Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It is a splendid epistle that expounds the glorious riches that belong to us in Christ, not only the good things we shall receive in the world to come, but even more the riches that we enjoy in Christ right now.

As I mentioned a moment ago, we have received in Christ the forgiveness of our sins. But how does this forgiveness come to us? Through faith. Faith in what? Faith in God's promise. Where do we find that promise? This question leads us back to the dawn of time, to God's creation and mankind's fall into sin and death. The promise runs like a golden thread through the Scriptures: from Abraham's call to Moses on Mt. Sinai, from the calamitous fall of Jerusalem to a seemingly insignificant birth in Bethlehem.

In other words, genuine faith in Christ means coming to understand that all of human history is the story of how God's judgment alone determines our destiny. For through Christ alone our Creator has rescued us all from certain doom, removed from us the ancient and inescapable curse. In Christ we meet the righteous, holy, and loving God who never forsook us in our folly but kept showing mercy until the greatest of all moments.

In Ephesians we shall meet also a man, a trained Pharisee who did not understand the Scriptures until he met Christ, the Key to the Scriptures. God has, writes Paul,

...lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Today's reading from Amos makes us ask, "Why did a lowly fig-farmer of Judah, whom God had pressed into service as his prophet and sent north into the wicked realm of King Jeroboam II, have nothing to fear from such an ungodly tyrant?" Likewise, Mark's account of how John the Baptist met his death makes us ask, "Why is the man who loses his head under the sword of Herod Antipas the only one in the story for whom we should not weep?"

As Paul says near the end of today's epistle, the fellowship of coheirs in Christ includes sinners whom God redeemed in every age. We are one in the Spirit with Amos and all the faithful prophets who spat in the face of Baal. The same messianic faith that Amos had enabled John to face the executioner's sword. It is our faith, too.

Now, to understand everything about the original plan of God that Paul calls the “Mystery,” you would have to comprehend things that God alone understands. Doctrinal battles have taken place over one major aspect to Ephesians, namely, God’s predestination of his saints to receive the gift of eternal life. This is where the Confessors who followed Luther – Martin Chemnitz and his colleagues – so wisely drew the line between that which God enables us to understand, and that which is not necessary for faith and can wait until we pass through the gates of heaven.

But meanwhile, in the seven weeks to come, passages from this wonderful letter shall impart to us yet more wisdom & insight into the Mystery of God’s salvation – and not least of all into how you I shall live out our calling. How shall we live purely as men & women, humbly with other members of the Body of Christ? When Satan attacks – and he will – what military equipment should you employ? For we are called not only to receive, but to enjoy and put to good use, the rich inheritance that is ours in Christ. ☩