

Faith in God's Blessing as Antidote to Fear of Curses: A Perspective from Ephesians 1-2

Teresa Okure (SHCJ)

Introduction

The fear of curses is a problem that seriously afflicts God's people in Africa and beyond; and this irrespective of social standing, rich or poor. The theme of the eleventh CABAN convention, "Blessings and Curses in the Bible" calls for genuine efforts to find scriptural solutions to this problem, especially since the Bible is often cited as God's authority justifying curses. The root cause of the problem seems to be the ignorance of Christians that God in Christ has liberated them and the entire creation once and for all from all curses and the influence of demonic powers. This liberating knowledge is not theoretical; it needs to be experienced in life; a life supported by a living community of believers in Christ Jesus.

This study explores exegetically how the Letter to the Ephesians understands God's blessing to believers (open to all peoples) and creation, with Eph 1:1-2:22 as the central text. It is evident from the repeated thrust of the letter that Paul wrote to give the Ephesians sound "knowledge", "wisdom and insight" (1:8-9; 2: 17-18; 3:14-19) into God's unsurpassable blessing to them in Christ, which, when received/believed can help them overcome the fear of inimical supernatural powers in their community.¹ The study proposes that a solid understanding and appropriation of this unsolicited divine blessing in Christ, given freely out of love with no strings attached, is sure antidote to the rampantly increasing fear of curses; one that can equally help the people to overcome such fears.

¹ The use of Paul as the author of the letter in this study does not engage in or ignore the debate about the authorship of the letter. It takes its bearing from the letter's mention of Paul as its author (Eph 1:1).

Though the word curse in the study topic is absent in the letter, it is present in the anti-God, death-dealing and enslaving forces mentioned, namely, “the elemental spirits” and “rulers of the power of the air” that govern the universe and unbelievers (2:1-2); and from which believers, Jews and Gentiles, have been freed by God “in Christ” as an act of God’s pure grace and love (2:3-6). The scope of the study is Ephesians 1-2, but its core interest is Eph 1:1-2:22 which provides the theological or God-based framework for the letter.

Religion and Life in Ancient Ephesus and Today

The letter is written to the Christians in Ephesus.² A city in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), Ephesus was rife with the activities of sorcerers and exorcists (cf. Acts 19:18-20). The information on the ancient city whose origin dates from the fifth-third millennia is quite fascinating.³ From ancient times, right up to the New Testament times with its Greek and Roman cultures, Ephesus was the home of the “Great Artemis of the Ephesians”. Her cult provided lucrative income for her leading devotees (Acts 19:23-41). Other cults included that of Asclepius and Hermes.⁴ Ephesus was not alone in practising such cults in the first century Roman Empire. We see this in other places in the Acts of the Apostles: Simon the magician (Acts 8:9-25); the priests of Zeus outside the walls in Iconium (Acts 14:8-18) and the Jewish exorcists sons of the high priest Sceva with other magicians who burnt up their books after encountering Paul (Acts 19:13-20).

The evidence of the Acts of the Apostles on Ephesus where Paul exercised his ministry twice (Acts 19:1-10, 23-40) is not negligible, though the letter itself seems to imply that Paul only “heard of” their faith (Eph 1:15). This could be in reference to what became of that faith after Paul’s initial ministry there (AD 52-55). In his last meeting with the elders of Ephesus in Miletus (Acts 20:17-36), Paul warned them to be on their guard since “fierce wolves will invade you and will have no mercy

² The phrase “in Ephesus” is missing in some of the manuscripts.

³ A Google search on “Ephesus” (ephesus.us) has 4,060,000 entries on almost every aspect of the ancient city which includes its mythology (ephesus.us/ephesus/mythology/) on the cult of the gods, especially, those of Artemis/Diana, Asclepius and Hermes.

⁴ See reference in previous note on mythology.

on the flock. Even from your own ranks there will be men coming forward with a travesty of the truth on their lips to induce the disciples to follow them” (20:29-30; NJB).

Ephesians dated to AD 60-64 is classified among Paul's four captivity epistles (the other three being Colossians, Philippians and Philemon).⁵ It would then have been written after his last farewell to the elders in Ephesus on his way from Jerusalem to Rome where he was first under house arrest (Acts 28:16); that is, at the tail end of his many missionary journeys.⁶ Further, Eph 4:14-16 warns against being “tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, at the mercy of the tricks people play and their cleverness in inventing lies”. Similarly, Paul warned Timothy, his close companion who became a presiding elder in Ephesus, “to safeguard sound teaching” (4:1-10; 6:3-10) against those “who would occupy themselves with myths and genealogies” (1 Tim 1:3-7).

This scenario in Ephesus and the first century Roman world is not very different from what obtains today in the Nigeria, Africa and beyond, though the attention to demonic and oppressive supernatural powers and the activities associated with them take different forms. Unique in modern context is the fear of curses and the claim by some people to have powers to break such curses and free people from their oppressive powers for lucrative purposes.⁷ This happens after the work of the early missionaries, as in Ephesus. This study aims simply to point out the life-centred relevance of the message of this letter for today, as Paul the designated author of the letter (Eph 1:1), did for the Ephesians and others.⁸ It is assumed that if people truly know their God-given worth and God's surpassing gift to them in Christ, they will think twice about allowing themselves to be driven by fear of curses to fall prey to the tricks some practitioners make in this regard.

⁵ Twice in the letter Paul refers to his being “a prisoner” in the Lord (3:1; 4:1).

⁶ Some critics say the letter was written when Paul was in prison in Caesarea, AD 58-60.

⁷ The “Presidential Address and Elaboration of the Convention Theme” in this volume, especially the section on the catalyst for the convention theme, gives a sketch of the problem in the Nigerian context.

⁸ Though addressed to the Ephesians mentioned in some manuscripts, scholars generally view the letter as addressed to all Christians to give them the knowledge and discipline they needed to grow into becoming true God's children.

Analysis of Ephesians 1:3-2:22

The study focuses on the exegetical analysis of the lead section which contains the core message of the letter on divine blessing. Its focus is to highlight the nature and importance of God's blessing which when received in faith benefits the recipient. The topic has "blessing" in singular and "curses" in the plural. This is because all the blessings mentioned in the letter are summed up "in Christ". For however many the promises God made, "the Yes" to them all "is in him" (2 Cor 1:20). The letter locates "in Christ" risen from the dead and "seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places" (1:20-21) the sum total of God's blessing of salvation to Jews and Gentiles (all peoples) that pre-dates creation and transcends time.

Structure of Ephesians 1:3-2:22

After the usual greeting stating the apostolic credentials (Eph 1:1-2), the letter develops the central message of God's blessing in Christ as follows: 1) God's plan/blessing for humanity and the cosmos in Christ (1:3-14); 2) Paul's prayer for the recipients of the letter inspired by deep joy in God's blessing for them (1:15-23); 3) a reminder of the life believers lived before they received God's grace in Christ as reason for firm belief in this blessing (2:1-10); 4), the bonding in community of Jews and Gentiles as concrete evidence of God's blessings received (2:11-22). The rest of the letter, chapters 3 – 6, teases out with varying degrees of success in parts (e.g., Eph 5:21-33) the practical dimensions of this blessing, how believers must show in daily life and their interpersonal relationships, that they have in truth received God's singular blessing in Christ and are now integral members of God's family and household made visible in the community of believers here and now.

God's blessing, a hidden mystery that predates creation, now revealed to believers (1:3-14)

Paul starts by blessing God "who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ in the heavenly places" (v.3). This verse is the text of the blessing in Christ, the content of which is expounded in verses 4:14. The act of blessing God (*eulogetos ho theos*) is worship, praise and thanksgiving offered to God. Paul praises God, "the Father of our Lord

Jesus Christ” who “has blessed” (*ho eulogesas*) us with every “spiritual blessing” (*eulogia pneumatikē*) in the heavenly places. The English word eulogy comes from this cluster of Greek words. To sing one’s eulogy is to praise the person for his or her achievements. Here on the contrary, God is the one singing our eulogy (*ho eulogesas hēmas*), as it were; blessing us by pouring out on us “every spiritual blessing” without our doing anything to merit them, except to open ourselves to receive this eulogy. The mention of “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” is in opposition to the heavenly powers that appear to afflict humans but from which God has freed believers (2:1-2).

God’s blessing in Christ rests on God’s unsolicited plan that predates creation (v.4) including all created powers in the heavens or on earth. The repeated motif of God’s “good pleasure” (*eudokia*1:5, 9, 11) and will recalls the refrain in the creation account in Genesis “and God saw that it was good” or “beautiful”. This planned blessing is born of God’s “good pleasure”, love and will (1:5, 9); it is God’s “free gift”, a manifestation of God’s richness “lavished” on believers (1:8). It is totally independent of what humans do (2:8-10); it is therefore not something which any creature in heaven or on earth can veto. Paul is at pains to emphasise the incredible, joyful, delightful and superabundant nature of God’s blessing in Christ poured on believers.

Concretely the blessing in Christ includes:

- **choice, adoption and call to holiness of believers as God’s children** in Christ (vv.4-6) before the foundation of the world. As Christ, God-Word incarnate existed before creation, so in him believers also existed before creation though they come to birth only in time. For this reason, the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” is intrinsically also “their/our Father”. As children share the same nature as their parents; so in Christ believers share God’s own nature.
- **The redemption through his blood, the blood of Christ** (vv.7-8). Blood is a core component in the etymology of blessing in the ancient world. It referred to the blood of animals sprinkled on

the altar of the gods as an act of consecration and dedication.⁹ This is evident in the Old English word for blessing: “*blodzein*” and the Northumbrian “*bloedsian*”, meaning “to consecrate, make holy, give thanks, from the Proto-Germanic *blodison* ‘hallow with blood, mark with blood’ (*blotham*)”.¹⁰ This etymology helps one to grasp the importance attributed to the blood of Jesus, offered, not to God but by God in Christ for us sinners.¹¹ In Hebrew context blood signified life (cf. Gen 4:10; 9:4).

- **This redemption, the forgiveness of our trespasses** (v.7), is not sacramental confession, but God’s joyful cancellation of the believers’ debts and trespasses; his total and radical liberation of believers from all that separated them from God. It is God’s rescue of them “from the power of darkness” and transfer “into the kingdom of God’s beloved son” (Col 1:13).
- **God’s loving revelation of the divine plan and will for believers rooted in God’s good pleasure and love for Christ** (v.9). The plan, God’s building plan, “is to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (cf. Col 1:20). This revelation is a major grace, something which God had hidden from creation until now to show God’s unsurpassable love for believers.
- **These believers, “people who would put their faith in Christ before he came”** (v.12) are generally identified as Jewish Christians as in 2:11; and the “you too” (v.13) is said to refer to Gentiles in the believing community. But verse 12 could equally refer to the first disciples, “the apostles and prophets” through whom all “are built into a holy Temple where God lives in the Spirit” (2:20). Among them were Gentiles as we see in the Acts

⁹ We recall the consecration of Israel on Mount Sinai as evidence of the ratification of the covenant and their consecration to God (Exod. 24:3-11, esp. v.6).

¹⁰ See further <https://dictionary.com/browse/blessing>.

¹¹ This is particularly clear in the Letter to the Hebrews where Christ offers himself for humanity once and for all; see further, Teresa Okure, “Hebrews: Sacrifice in an African Perspective”, Daniel Patte, J. Severino Coratto, Archie Lee, Teresa Okure and Nicole Duran (eds.), *Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 535-538.

of the Apostles (11:19-21),¹² though it is often taken for granted that verse 12 refers only to Jews and verse 13 to Gentiles as in 2:11. The same applies in 4:1-16.

Worthy of note in this section (1:3-14) is the author's relentless effort to stretch the language to express the inexpressible love, riches, wealth and delight of God in working for humans. Believers themselves are richly endowed; they receive "the heritage"; they are "stamped", "sealed with the promised seal of the Holy Spirit". God has chosen and predestined them to be "holy and blameless"; even as God is holy. Equally noticeable is the mention of Christ eleven times (by name or by pronoun) in the twelve verses of this section (vv.3-14). To this one adds the repeated phrase "in him" in almost every verse. This emphasis registers the centrality of Christ and the Christ-event as the core of God's blessing to be received in faith. "In him" believers find their true identity and blessing from God. The entire tone is joyful, rich and grace-filled, involving the Trinity: The Father's plan revealed in the Son is effected in believers through the Holy Spirit, given as "the pledge of their inheritance".

Paul's prayer to God for the addressees (1:15-23)

The recognition of God's pure and incredible gratuitous blessing to believers, quite independent of any contribution from them, calls forth spontaneous thanksgiving from Paul. This prayer recalls Mary's Magnificat, her joyful response to what "the almighty" had done for her which she received in faith and was praised for doing so by Elizabeth (Luke 1:46-55). Paul's prayer of thanksgiving requests God to give the addressees wisdom and insight into the depths of this surpassing blessing given to them in Christ Jesus, to whom all things in heaven and on earth are now subject. It equally prays that the addressees themselves maybe open to receive the revelation of this revealed mystery; and for them to know that God's grace-filled blessing "at work" in them has depths, heights, width and breath that cannot be measured. Only by

¹² Among the evangelisers of the Church of Antioch were non-Jews which probably explains why this community was the first ever mixed Christian community; one that formed the apostles Paul and Barnabas; "Simon called Niger and Lucius of Cyrene" (Acts 13:1) would most likely have been Africans.

knowing/recognizing and believing in this gift will they be filled “with the utter fullness of Christ”.

Need for believers to remember their former life before they received God’s blessing in Christ (Eph 2:1-10)

In this section, Paul addresses God’s reconciliation of believers to the divine self. Once dead in sin and subject to the diminishing powers of the “elemental spirits of the universe”, believers now enjoy the freedom God gives them once for all in Christ. This remembering serves as solid basis for gratitude for God’s immense gift in Christ. Furthermore, since all believers are in Christ who is now seated at God’s right hand far above all principalities and powers, whom he has defeated once and for all and led in triumphal procession (the way ancient rulers led their conquered enemies in triumphal procession), they too “in him” are raised above these powers and enjoy the same victory over them as does Christ.

Since salvation is completely God’s free gift (1:6; 2:5, 8), a core blessing with no strings attached, it leaves no room for boasting. Equally any fear that it might be taken away is ruled out. Believers themselves are and remain God’s own “work of art created in Christ Jesus” created to lead the kind of life God had destined for them from the beginning (2:8-10). Throughout this section Paul emphasises that God’s gift in Christ is to be lived “for the praise of God’s glory”. God not only creates and destines believers to live for the praise of his glory, God working in them through the Spirit ensures that they realise their purpose in life, if they believe and remain firmly rooted in this gift.

Visible evidence of God’s blessing to all believers (2:11-22)

In the previous section Paul dealt with God’s reconciliation of believers to the divine self. In this section he deals with God’s reconciliation of believers to one another. The concrete proof of what God has done for believers in Christ is that they (Jews and Gentiles) are now one people in Christ. The Gentiles in particular are “no longer strangers and foreigners” as they were viewed in the OT covenant (by God’s decree), but members of God’s household, “built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus as the corner stone” (2:20). By his death on the cross Christ has demolished the dividing wall of hatred and separation that existed between Jews and Gentiles, prescribed in the

Jewish law. He bonds both Jews and Gentiles into one in himself, with equal rights, even as every structure in a building is aligned to the corner stone.

Christ makes of the two races one person in him by creating in himself “one new humanity” (*kainos anthrōpos*, v.15) out of the two; through his blood on the cross. Earlier (1:10) Paul had said, as does the letter to the Colossians, that in Christ, God has united to the divine self, “things in heaven and things on earth” making peace (*shalom*, wholeness) “by the blood of his cross” (Col 1:20).¹³ The reference to blood here recalls the importance of blood as life. Jesus’ life unto death and resurrection is the ground on which the new humanity is formed and consecrated as one entity to God, in which believers find their new identity.

The one “new humanity” again recalls creation where God created humanity (*adam*) male and female in God’s own image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27) as one entity or “from one stock” (Acts 17:26) and found that to be “very good” and “beautiful” (Gen 1:31) before the sin of separation set in (Gen 3:1-19). This entire section emphasises that God’s new blessing is not a theological idea; it is life-centred, experienced physically, socially by the bonding in the believing community, the family and household of God, constituted by God himself. It embraces Jews and Gentiles, people previously separated from each other as by divine decree, on equal terms and transcends all human boundaries.

Synthesis of the Exegetical Analysis

The above analysis of the core section of the letter barely exhausts the great wealth and depth of its insight. The note of joyful praise of God permeates the section, even as is God’s own joy and delight in giving this blessing. Likewise, is the emphasis that believers are what they are by God’s pure and unmerited grace. This is summed up in their being created in Christ before time began and in their being richly endowed by him, stamped and sealed by God’s Holy Spirit as God’s own inheritance. God does not simply create and endow them with incredible status and dignity; God continues to work in them to realise God’s loving plan for

¹³ See further on this Teresa Okure, “‘In him all things hold together’: A Missiological Reading of Colossians 1:15-20”, *International Review of Mission* vol. XCI no. 360 (2002): 62-72.

them and finds immense joy “good pleasure” in doing so. In view of this all that is required of the addressees is to receive, or believe this surpassing gift, to seek to understand and appropriate it with joy and gratitude to God, knowing that in Christ they are raised far above and superior to all powers, earthly and heavenly.

The permeating refrain “in Christ” registers the solid reason for this belief. If Christ is in no way subject to supernatural powers whatever their name and nature, then those who are “in him” cannot in any way be subject to the influence of these powers which are under them in Christ. God’s power in raising Christ from the dead, the core of Christian faith, is sure proof that God’s gift to believers is not mere words. The richness of this thought with the beauty, grace and joy with which it is expressed can only be seized and savoured by repeated attentive reading and reflection on the section.

Consequence of God’s Work for Believers (Ephesians 3-6)

In the rest of the letter Paul consolidates the teaching on the centrality of Christ as the sum total of God’s blessing and highlights its practical consequence for believers. In chapter three he recapitulates the truth that viewed from the standpoint of humanity, the mystery of Christ consists in the breaking down of barriers between Jews and Gentiles making them one person in Christ, something unheard of before, namely, that “The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6). The mission to proclaim this revealed mystery universally, even to “authorities in the heavenly places”, is entrusted to the church (3:10-14). Paul himself is the privileged, though unworthy, instrument to make this mystery known to the Gentiles. The mission for him entails joyful suffering which he bears gladly for the sake of the gospel (3:1- 5, 7-9). Awareness of this trust again moves him to pray powerfully for the Gentiles, as integral part of God’s family, to grasp its profound meaning so as to become in the totality of their being deeply rooted in Christ (3:14-20) The prayer ends with the memorable praise of God “who can accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (3:20-21).

In chapters four to six Paul begs and exhorts the Ephesians still as “a prisoner in the Lord” (4:1) “to live the life worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (4:1), that is, according to “the Christ they have received”. Paul then offers them practical ways of doing this as people who have received new life and identity from God. By living according to “the Christ they have received”, they prove their belief that in Christ God has rescued them from the powers and influence of inimical spirits and has stamped and sealed them with God’s Spirit; the Spirit who gives them God’s life and guides and directs the church’s mission. The exhortation includes the usual household codes of the time; but now Christianised with varying degrees of success.¹⁴ Paul further exhorts the recipients to commit themselves constantly to prayer and put on “the whole armour of God” to arm themselves against all influences of the devil (6:10-20).

Relevance of the Message of Ephesians for Today

The forgoing makes it evident that Paul sought to empower the Ephesians to combat the false teaching on demonic powers by providing them with solid knowledge about their new life and identity in Christ as a singular blessing from God. Similarly, the way to help liberate all God’s people today from the fear of curses and the influence of demonic powers (whatever their nature) is to ground them in solid knowledge of truth and faith in God’s work in them and for them; to help them believe that what God has done for them in Christ Jesus is real. Irrespective of their former religious, national or racial affiliation, they are to know and be firmly grounded in this faith: that is, to receive God’s liberation, the forgiveness of sin (separation from God and other human beings) which God has given to individuals, humanity and the creation in Christ. Because God’s deed is a totally unmerited free gift, it can only be received by faith. Christ himself, the mystery among us, is proof of this

¹⁴ This applies particularly to Eph 5:22-30. The interpretation of this passage is quite controversial, see, for instance, Teresa Okure, “Unmasking Ephesians 5:22-33: An Arch Kyriachal Culture in Christological Garb”, Paul Bere, Mary Sylvia Nwachukwu, Anthony I. Umoren (eds.), *Women in the Bible/Les Femmes dans la Bible*, Points of View of African Biblical Scholars (Abidjan: Pan African Association of Catholic Exegetes [PACE], 2013), 351-371.

gift; the community of believers, the church, which now embraces Jews and gentiles on equal terms is another.

Unfortunately, today the power of the gospel to end the separation between Jews and Gentiles (peoples of different national and ethnic affiliations) eludes us. The life-centred knowledge of God's gift in Christ is thin. As a result, people have failed to allow the gospel to demolish the walls of multiple divisions that are rife and increasingly waxing strong even within the community of believers, the household of God. Yet living by such faith also helps to bond our diversity into communion and severs as a formidable force against curses and powers hostile to the gospel.

It is essential to emphasise, as is repeatedly done in the letter, that God's deed in Christ is a totally unmerited, unsolicited free gift, a grace, an act of God's pure love "in the beloved". By his passion, death and resurrection or decisive victory over sin and death, Christ becomes the Lord of the Universe. God's victory in him over all enslaving forces is utterly certain and irreversible. Therefore, nobody has the right to subject self to enslavement by the fear of curses or claim the power to liberate others from such curses when God himself has rescued them from these powers and placed them in/with his beloved Son seated with him in heaven.

Most importantly, Paul makes prayer of praise and thanksgiving to God for the addressees a vital construct of his concern for them. This is true not only in the core section of the study (1:15-23) but also in the hortatory section of the letter (cf. 3:14-21). Jesus equally made prayer an essential construct of his messianic ministry.¹⁵ To pray for the people is to acknowledge that God, not the pastor or theologian, is the giver of all blessings in life, the author of salvation and liberation from all demonic powers and every type of evil. It is equally essential to recognize that the call to participate in helping the people to recognize God's gift in Christ is a singular blessing. We see this in Paul's self-introduction (Eph 3:1-7) as in his other letters. For him the ministry is a trust, not something to boast about (cf. 1 Cor 9:16-17) as do today's curse breakers. Jesus

¹⁵ Cf. John 17; 11:41-42; Matt 11:25-26.

equally saw his ministry as God's work, God working in him (cf. John 4:34; 14:10-11; 17:4).

The "spiritual warfare" counselled in the letter (6:11-20) is frequently cited in deliverance sessions today. Yet what is counselled in the passage is quite different from what obtains in deliverance sessions today. The practitioners claim authority to break curses magic-like, without requiring any moral change in them or in those for whom the curses are allegedly broken. For Paul, the individuals in Christ are to break the curses and overcome the demonic powers. They do this, not by commanding and ordering these powers, but by making every effort to live and grow in the new life God has freely given to them; that is, by living according to the Christ they have received (3:1-13).

The challenge for CABAN members and other biblical scholars is to undertake today the service of expounding the truth of the gospel to the people in their diverse contexts as Paul did for the Ephesians. We need to find ways to reach out to our many brothers and sisters who are like sheep without a shepherd ready for the slaughter by the rampant false teaching on blessings and curses that have their basic interest in materialism, away from God's plan of total liberation, which does not exclude material wellbeing.

The letter to the Ephesians has much to offer today as the way forward in our commitment to help liberate people from the escalating fear of curses in Nigeria, Africa and globally. For this to happen, preaching to the people is insufficient; we need to equip them to gain the knowledge of faith that sets free. Once they gain this knowledge of faith, they will not readily fall prey to quack curse breakers. Since God's blessing in Christ excludes no one, whoever proclaims this blessing (given unconditionally, without distinction based on merit) needs to seriously undertake that apostolate of prayer even for such pastors and preachers since they too are destined to become in Christ conscious and full members of God's family and household. In this way all peoples will enjoy the liberation from the fear of curses and grow in the life that God gives in Christ.