

Paul's story

This letter is from Paul, an apostle and prisoner of the Lord Jesus Christ, faithfully serving and sharing the Good News of Jesus. It is written to the people of Jesus in Ephesus ... (sigh)
That's not right, lets try that again ...

This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of King Jesus. I am writing to those set apart for God in Ephesus, who are faithful followers of King Jesus. May God our Father and Jesus our Lord and King give you grace and peace.¹

There, will that do for an opening?

Oh, hi there. I've had my head in this letter-writing business so thoroughly that I didn't notice you there. How are you? New to prison life? Yes, it's cold and uncomfortable and the food is ... well, let's say you won't eat it until you have to, and there's never enough.

What am I doing? I'm writing a letter. Tychicus here is writing it down for me and we're sending it to one of the groups of Jesus' followers we're connected to. Do you mind if I just continue a bit, I've got an idea in my head and I want it to come out right. Thanks.

Okay, Tych, where were we? Oh, yes.

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, the King, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with the King. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us ...

Oh, right, I'll slow down.

... blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with the King. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in the King to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus the King. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.

God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding the King—which is to fulfill his own good plan. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of the King—everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, because we are united with the King, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan.

God's purpose was that we Jews who were the first to trust in the King would bring praise and glory to God. And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in the King, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy

¹ Ephesians 1:1-2 (NLT with liberties taken)

Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him.²

There, that's a bit of a mouthful, but I think it captures all I meant to say.

What's that? What do I mean by blessings under a new king? Has Nero been overthrown? No, Jesus is way beyond Nero's league. No, that's not why I'm in prison. Why I'm here will wait, but let me tell you about this new king.

You see, I started off hating the whole idea of this king. I was brought up a Jew, and all the Jews knew my way of life from my youth, both in Tarsus where I was born and in Jerusalem where I received my religious training. I belonged to the strictest sect of our religion.

I was convinced that I ought to do whatever I could against the name of this new King, Jesus of Nazareth. And that's what I did. I started in Jerusalem with authority delegated to me by the chief priests. I not only locked up many of the Christians in prison, but I also cast my vote to condemn them to death. By whipping them in every synagogue I tried to force them to blaspheme this Jesus, and since I was so violently opposed to them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.

On one of these journeys, I was traveling to Damascus with the approval and authority of the chief priests. Suddenly, about noon, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shine all around me and those traveling with me. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic,

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.”

I asked,

“Who are you Lord?”

The Lord answered,

“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as my servant and witness. You are to tell the world about this experience and about other times I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles - to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness of sins and a place among God's people who are set apart by faith in me.”

After that I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but proclaimed the Good News first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should turn away from their past life and turn to God and live lives that demonstrate that change.³

² Ephesians 1:3-10 (NLT with liberties taken)

³ Adapted from Acts 26:4-23 (NRSV and NLT)

I've travelled throughout Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus, Turkey and Greece sharing my story with people and letting them know that forgiveness from the wrongs we have done and freedom from our addictions and superstitions are available in King Jesus. What prevents you from pledging allegiance to the King?

Okay, so you want to know why I'm in prison. This time it was for disturbing the peace, you see, there was this riot that broke out. And no, it was not my fault.

Yes I said "this time." Yes there have been other times.

What about the other times? Well, there was the time I expelled an evil spirit from a fortune-telling slave and her owners were ticked that I spoiled their money-maker. And then there was that riot in Ephesus. But most of the time I've been accused of conning unsuspecting Romans women to give me money.

No, I am not a religious huckster just trying to scam a buck. And that's not fair. Let me tell you the rest of the story. You see I was working on this collection that we took to Jerusalem to support the original group of Jesus-followers there. They've been through a famine. They can't get work, they've been cut off from their families, they are mocked and beaten in the streets. They need help.

And so I thought that bringing a gift from the new believers from other nationalities would be a tremendous encouragement to them and show them that God was working beyond their borders and boundaries. And yes, a number of women have accepted the message of Jesus' death and resurrection, and donated generously to our cause. But none of it was for me! Yet their husbands or families saw it as throwing money away to a scam and they had me hauled into jail.

Yes, I know it looks bad. That's probably why I'm still here.

Oh, didn't I tell you about Jesus' death and resurrection? I left out the best part of the story. You see, Jesus was God's son, sent to teach us that God loves us and that we can have a relationship with him. But Jesus' message of love and acceptance meant he welcomed all sorts of people that the leaders of society didn't want to encourage. As well, when the crowds caught on to his teaching of this new freedom, the hold the religious leaders had over the people grew weaker and weaker. So, they ended up having him killed, crucified by the Romans.

Yes, I know crucifixion is only for rebels against the Empire. But Jesus was no rebel, he is King of a completely different kind of kingdom. But this was all part of God's plan. Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice for sin, a gift of love that tore down the wall our rebellion had created between God and humanity.

How can he be king when he's dead? He's not dead. Yes, I know Roman soldiers are very efficient at killing by crucifixion - they've had enough practice, especially in Judea. And Jesus did die, but he rose again on the third day, never to die again.

Yes I know it's hard to believe, and I didn't believe it at first as I told you. But he spoke to me and has been with me these years of serving him. He is alive and he rules the world at God's side.

No, I'm not just a crazy loner who has delusions of grandeur. Just wait and my friend Luke, my coworkers Timothy and Titus and others will be by in a bit. Tychicus here will be taking my letter to Ephesus if I ever get done with it. And I've had many other Christians with me in prison. Why there was Andronicus and Junia, other people commissioned to declare the good news (and my relatives besides), and now Aristarchus and Epaphras. They are over there.

You're not sure you want to sign up for a religion where you get tossed in prison all the time? Well, present circumstances are not worth comparing to the glorious reward that awaits those who believe in Jesus. He will raise us from the dead as well, at the last day, and we will share his glory when he reigns.

How do I keep this up? Well, I told you about how Jesus came and showed himself to me and then gave me a job to do. I am bound and determined to do the best I can for him until my days on earth are over. He sacrificed himself to give me and all who believe in him eternal life, life filled with God's Spirit and blessed by His presence. If that costs me some time in prison, or even my life, so be it. It's hardly a drop in the bucket compared to time I'll spend with Jesus.

Yes, I'd love to tell you more about this. But while Tychicus is here let me get a little further in this letter. Tychicus, I need something between that last bit and this, but let me give you this while it's in my mind.

"It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in the King. He did this all on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, the King.

Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in King Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging the we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make or save ourselves. It's God who makes and God who saves. He created each of us by King Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work all God's children can and should do.⁴

Tychicus, that's enough for today. I want to talk with my new friend here. See what Timothy thinks of this first part. Now, where is my cloak? It's damp in here.

⁴ Ephesians 2:1-10 (The Message)
The Story of Paul
Rick Schellenberg