

Saint Paul's letters, as rich and deep as they are, are not always easy to understand. Even Saint Peter admitted this. In Peter's second letter to all Christians he was referring to Paul's letters when he wrote, "in them are some things hard to understand."

Today's reading from The Letter to the Ephesians is just such a letter. Paul wrote this letter towards the end of his life while he was in prison and though it is addressed to the church in Ephesus it was meant for all Christians. So why is it so hard to understand?

In the Greek original, the 14 verses we just heard are actually one long run-on sentence; overflowing with deep theological terms and phrases. But this introduction is not meant to be a clear explanation of doctrine. Rather, it is a hymn of praise. Paul is praising God for his goodness. He is not explaining God's plan for our salvation, that will come later. Here he proclaims it, and he proclaims it with awe, delight, and respect.

So it is worth a closer look. Like a chest full of treasure, we can sift through it looking for gems. And there is one idea or theme that echoes throughout this passage, the idea that we are chosen by God.

Normally when we hear of God's chosen people we think of the Jewish people. But Saint Paul makes it clear that there is no longer a single "chosen people," but as Christians, followers of Christ, each and everyone of us is chosen by God, adopted into His family as His sons and daughters.

Think about this for a moment. We are chosen by God. It is not such a wonder that man would choose God, but it is amazing that God should choose man. What does God gain by choosing us? What does He gain by giving us the grace of the sacraments which allow us to participate in His own divine life?

God gains nothing, but we gain everything. God chose to create us. And then even after we turned away from Him, He chose to redeem us. And so we have hope. God created us with all the grace we would need to live with Him forever in the Garden of Joy. And although we lost that grace through stubbornness and the envy of the devil, we have hope that we will once again know that happiness that we were created for. God has not given up on us. He has stayed with us. He knows our names.

I read an interesting observation recently on one of the differences between men and women. When two women discuss an important personal issue they will sit facing each other, looking at each other. When two men discuss something important and personal they will sit side by side looking off into the distance together.

God sits with us, side by side or face to face, all the time. The Creator of all that is, our Redeemer, the all-powerful, all-knowing Lord of the universe sits with us in spite of our sinful and rebellious nature, because He loves us, and because He has chosen us.

When someone offends us, we may think ourselves big-hearted if we do not seek revenge but are content with just tolerating our offender. But God does much more than just tolerate us. Saint Paul refers to an “inheritance of glory.” God is already working on building a room for us in His heavenly mansion. He has chosen us, not to be in the servants quarters or the caretakers cottage, or the huts of the tenant farmers, He wants us beside Him, for all eternity.

Imagine a criminal who attempts to murder a king. His attempt fails, he is arrested and thrown into prison, down in the deepest, darkest pit, where the walls are always damp with mould and rats scurry around the floor. He

deserves his punishment and most likely should be grateful that he is still alive.

Now imagine the king shows up at the prison door, opens it and walks into the prisoner's cell. He leaves the door open and tells the criminal he is free to go. The prisoner is overjoyed and leaves his cell. But as soon as he does, the guard closes the cell door, locking the king inside.

The prisoner is shocked and the guard explains that the king has taken on the prisoner's punishment so that the prisoner could go free and have a second chance at life.

The prisoner climbs the slimy stairs up out of the dungeon. When he comes to the castle courtyard he is greeted by one of the king's officials. The official leads the criminal up to a beautiful rooftop apartment in the royal palace and gives him the key saying, "The king has desired to give you these rooms as your own, and he has also named you a royal counselor, with a lifetime salary and access to the entire palace."

That would be a very generous king, to do so much for a man who tried to kill him. But that pales in comparison to what God has done for us.

By our hard heartedness, and our sinful nature, we have attempted to murder God, to banish Him from our lives. But through the cross God has given us much more than any earthly king ever could. Because God has chosen us.

Why has He chosen us? Paul tells us that we have been chosen to be holy and without blemish. The greek word for holy is "hagios." It means to be set apart for a special purpose or mission.

A church, for example, is a holy place set apart because it has an extraordinary role to play in the world. It is not to serve as a theater or a community center or a venue for speakers. The purpose of a church is to serve as a place where the human and divine come together in the sacraments. The church is a place where God can once more walk among His people as He did so long ago in the Garden. The church is a place where earthly life is linked with Heaven.

St. Paul tells us that every Christian is like that. We are set apart, with an extraordinary role to play in the world. Every Christian is someone who brings earth and Heaven together. We are different. We are set apart. We are a holy people.

And as a holy people we are not called to be passive, sitting on the sidelines watching the battle from a safe distance. God has come to dwell in our hearts to invite us to be His warriors, His messengers, and His ambassadors. We have been chosen to be holy, to be elite knights of Jesus Christ, angels of light and wisdom in a darkened and foolish world. By choosing us God has given our lives a purpose far beyond anything we could have chosen on our own.

God makes us “without blemish.” God makes us worthy to be His followers and He supplies us with what we need to become holy.

God's grace purifies our hearts of greed, lust, laziness, dishonesty, and every form of selfishness. He then fills it with wisdom, joy, courage, and all the gifts of the Holy Spirit and sends us out into the world.

The country we live in, and in many ways, particularly the state we live in, are once again mission territory. That means that each and every one of us is a missionary. You may have a mental image of a missionary as a meek peace

loving individual who takes pains to spread the word of God in a soft gentle way careful not to offend anyone. And for his troubles he may be martyred.

I would like to offer you a different vision of a missionary. St. Paul, and the apostles of Jesus went into the world as warriors, battling the darkness that has infected the land. They did not worry about hurt feelings or causing offense because they knew the importance of their mission, which is now, as it was then, no less than the salvation of humanity.

That is our role as missionaries in mission territory. To stand up for all that is good and true and beautiful. And if we are attacked then we bear those attacks with the dignity fitting to sons and daughters of God.

And when at last we enter into the mansion God has prepared for us we can say, as Saint Paul did, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."