

“To the Praise of His Glory.”

The Second in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

Texts: Ephesians 1:3-14; Deuteronomy 7:1-12

If you want to draw a blank stare from someone, tell them that you are a Calvinist. Those who actually know what the word means are often taken aback by the realization that there are still people around who believe such things. In evangelical circles, the term “Calvinist” provokes several common reactions. A). You believe in predestination, so you must hold to some sort of fatalism. B). Because you believe in predestination, you cannot possibly engage in evangelism or effective prayer. C). Because you’ve aligned yourself with one of history’s most notorious spoilsports, John Calvin, it must be your life’s mission to make sure that no one enjoys themselves. All of these are gross misconceptions, but they arise so often because Calvinism seems so completely out of step with contemporary ways of thinking and doing. But there are reasons why many Christians still identify themselves as “Calvinists.” One reason is found in our text, Ephesians 1:3-14, where it is the Apostle Paul, who sets forth with great power and clarity those very same doctrines most often associated with Calvinism, namely predestination and particular redemption (or as it is commonly known—limited atonement).

We are resuming our series on Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians. In our first sermon, I set forth a basic case for Pauline authorship of this letter, and identified some of the circumstances under which Paul wrote this epistle while he was imprisoned in Rome at some point early in the 60’s of the first century. We saw how the Book of Ephesians was likely a circular letter which eventually became associated with the church in Ephesus. The letter has an impersonal tone to it—a bit odd since Paul had been in Ephesus for several years and no doubt knew many people in the church. This indicates that this letter was probably sent to more than one congregation. Furthermore, Ephesians does not address any specific doctrinal controversy, as is typical of most of the letters we know to have come from Paul, but its themes and content are the “quintessence of Paulinism.” This is quite evident in our passage this morning, where Paul takes us from eternity past, to the doing and dying of Jesus, to that time when each one of us comes to faith in Jesus Christ, and then to the resurrection of our bodies at the end of age. Paul lays all of this out in panoramic form to show us that from beginning to our end, our salvation is the work of a gracious God in the lives of those whom he has chosen to save *because* he is a gracious God who saves sinners.

Nothing upsets Americans more than to be told “no”—that they cannot do something. In this section of Ephesians, Paul tells us “no”—we cannot save ourselves. This is why people hate Calvinism. This is why people will always hate Calvinism. This kind of a gripe has little to do with Calvin, but with the apostle Paul. In fact, Paul will make it crystal clear that it is God who saves us when we could do nothing to save ourselves. God does this by choosing a vast multitude to be saved before time begins, by sending Christ to die at just the right time for those whom the Father has chosen, and then by calling all those whom the Father has chosen, and for whom the son has died, to faith in Jesus, through the means of the preaching of the gospel, people who are now indwelt and sealed by the Holy Spirit unto the day of redemption. In these opening verses of Ephesians, we are not only given a “big picture” of God’s purposes in saving sinners (the box top of the puzzle, if you will), but we are also given the means as to how those sinners will be saved—the preaching of the gospel.

To put this Pauline panorama in the simplest of terms, the Father chooses, the Son redeems, and the Spirit calls and regenerates. Redemption decreed, accomplished, and applied. This lies at the very heart of Reformed and Calvinist theology. So, we may draw blank stares when we tell people we believe this,

if you simply open up the text of Ephesians 1:3-14, it is virtually self-evident that these doctrines of election and particular redemption are not only taught in Scripture, but these doctrines are the basis for our evangelism and for prayer—our response to a gracious God who has saved us from ourselves.

Before we talk about the specifics of our passage, there are several things we must keep in mind when we tackle a difficult subject such as this. Most Americans begin the discussion of election and predestination with the presupposition that everyone should be entitled to heaven (since it is up to them to “accept or reject” Jesus). From this perspective, if God chooses to save some and not others, he’s not being fair—which makes sense if this is your starting point. But the Bible doesn’t begin the discussion about human salvation from sin with the presupposition that it falls within our ability to save ourselves (if only we would). The Bible begins with creation. Adam was created like God in every way that a creature can be created like God. Adam (the divine image-bearer) owed God his total allegiance and perfect obedience, but instead used his God-given freedom to revolt against his creator. So when we talk about salvation, we must first consider the gravity of the human predicament. We are a fallen race who can do absolutely nothing to save ourselves. The Bible says we are born guilty for Adam’s act of rebellion, and that we have a sinful nature which ensures that every decision we make is made from the perspective of self-centered sinfulness. We sin because we want to sin. In fact, we love to sin! The last thing one of Adam’s fallen children wishes to do is “accept Jesus.”

Another thing we must keep in mind as we proceed is that we are creatures (sinful creatures at that) created by the same God who has chosen to redeem us. I hate to break it to you, but God does not owe you salvation. You are clay in the creator’s hands (to quote Paul in Romans 9) and your creator is free to do with you whatever he wishes. When Adam fell, God would have been perfectly just had he just wiped the human race out and started over. But instead, he chose to redeem his fallen race. When we consider Jesus’ agony in the Garden of Gethsemane before going to the cross, to the point that he cried out “*My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will*” (Matthew 26:39) it begins to become clear that there could be no other way for God to save this fallen race than to send Jesus to suffer and die to redeem us from our sins. God is love. But he is also holy. Because he is love, he sent Jesus to redeem all those whom he has chosen. Because he is holy, Jesus must bear in his own body God’s wrath, which we rightly deserve. There is no other way.

It is also important to remember that as creatures we are bound to both time and space. We are but a vapor, a cloud, here today, gone tomorrow. Life is short—even 70-90 years, a long life, pales in comparison to eternity. Because we are creatures, we don’t know near as much as we think we do. The wisest among us are those who realize that the more you know, the more you realize that you don’t know. But God is not defined nor bound by such creaturely limitations. God is eternal, omniscient, and omnipresent. He knows all, he is everywhere with all his perfections, and he exists outside of time. Therefore, our notions of what God should and should not do to secure our salvation are only so much piffle. Who are we to tell God what he can and cannot do? It would be one thing to appeal to justice and fairness if we were without sin. But how dare the guilty criminal tell both the judge and the jury that what they are doing is immoral because the condemned doesn’t think it is fair?

In Ephesians 1:3-14, the apostle Paul puts us in our place, while at the same time exalting the grace of God whose boundless wisdom is on display through the way in which he saves sinners. Paul does this by simply giving us a panoramic view of God’s plan and purpose to save us from our sins. This is a remarkable passage of Scripture and all of us should be familiar with this passage and the Trinitarian conception of salvation found within.

With that bit of background in mind, we turn to our text, verses 3-14 of Ephesians 1.

Many first year Greek students dread this passage because it is often the text used for final examinations (they have to translate it). The reason for this dread is that verses 3-14 is one continuous and complicated sentence in the Greek text. One critical scholar complained that this is “the most monstrous sentence conglomeration . . . I have ever met in the Greek language.”¹ While I don’t think this sentence is monstrous, it does take up twenty-six lines in the Greek New Testament. It is filled with relative clauses, participles, prepositional phrases, and various synonyms. Some think this was originally the text of a hymn, part of a Christian liturgy, or even a divine “eulogy” or blessing from God.² The latter is the most likely. This sentence does have a liturgical feel about it (as though it may have been used in worship) and as the details enumerated by Paul begin to unfold, the passage has the sense of picking up speed, almost like a snowball rolling downhill, gaining speed and mass as it goes along.³ It a profound declaration of God’s grace, as well as a mind-boggling statement about the majesty of God.

The first portion of the sentence (vv. 3-6) contains a blessing (*eulogia*) and a declaration of praise for what God has done in providing for the salvation of sinners. In verse 3, we read, “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.*” The Christian is to ascribe praise to God because God has bestowed upon his people every spiritual blessing in Christ. The first thing to notice is that all of God’s blessings come to his people through their union with Christ. When Paul speaks of Christians being “in Christ” (which Calvin regards as an important category by which we are to understand Paul’s overall theology of salvation) Paul is referring to the fact that when we come to trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and to receive the righteousness of Christ (justification), the Holy Spirit indwells our hearts, and unites us to Christ, who is in heavenly places (at the right hand of the Father in heaven).

This is why Paul speaks of these blessings as spiritual (not material) and why he speaks of the blessings as in some sense “heavenly.” Jesus has been raised from the dead and has ascended into heaven. How do we receive his benefits if he is in heaven and we remain on earth? The answer is that through the indwelling Spirit, we receive everything that Jesus has for us—not just some of his blessings, but all of his blessings. Jesus is now our living head and the source of all spiritual life and blessing. There is no sense whatsoever that Paul has in mind some sort of a two-tiered Christian life, where those who live in victory mode receive better and greater blessings than those of us who struggle with sin, and who seem to be making little progress in our sanctification. To be in Christ is to possess every spiritual blessing, not just some of God’s blessings. This is because these blessings come to us from Christ, they are received through faith, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and are not based upon what we may or may not do. As unworthy beggars, we just stick out our hands, and through faith, receive all that God has for us.

In verse 4, Paul enumerates these spiritual blessings. The apostle begins by reminding us that these blessings stem solely from God’s purpose established in eternity past, “*even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.*” Paul is crystal clear that

¹ Cited in M. Barth, *Ephesians 1-3*, 77.

² See the discussion of this in Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 10-19.

³ John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity press, 1979, 32-33).

our salvation results from a decision God made about us “*before the foundation of the world.*” The notion that God foreknows what will happen and then chooses those whom he knows will respond to the gospel is not found anywhere in the text. God foreknows, because he has foreordained.

According to Paul, God chose us “in Christ.” This is a very important assertion for several reasons. We know from a number of biblical passages that Jesus was chosen by the Father to be the redeemer of God’s elect (under the terms of an inner-Trinitarian covenant, called the covenant of redemption) as well as the mediator of the covenant of grace. This means that Jesus’ own inheritance is those given to him by the Father (that’s us). Jesus will redeem the elect. That is his mission. This intra-Trinitarian covenant underlies Jesus’ “high priestly prayer” in John 17, where Jesus prays as follows (vv. 6-10): “*I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.*”

Christ’s redemptive mission (which underlies his incarnation) is to accomplish salvation for all those given him by the Father. This means that no one is saved apart from Christ. Since Christ is the one in whom we are chosen, the way we know we have been chosen by God is that we believe in Jesus Christ. We are not saved apart from Christ’s work, nor are we saved without trust in him. Notice too that when Paul speaks of us being “chosen in Christ” the goal of God’s redemptive purpose is that sinners will “*be holy and blameless before him.*” We are “in Christ” because we have been chosen by God. But all those who are “in Christ” will also be transformed from sinners into men and women who are “holy and blameless before God.” This transformation stems from, and is based upon, our union with Christ who not only has justified us (a once for all declaration that we “are holy”) but who also begins within us the life-long process of sanctification, which is the goal of our union with Christ. If we are chosen to be made “holy” this means that God regarded us as sinners when we were chosen.

In the latter part of verse 4 and then on into verse 5, Paul explains this in a bit more detail. “*In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.*” Notice that all of this stems from the fact that God is love. “*In love he predestined us.*” We are saved because of who God is (loving), not that we are lovable. As we saw in our Old Testament, God chose Israel because he was loving, not because Israel was lovable. As we read in verses 6-7 of Deuteronomy 7, “*the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples.*” A similar sentiment can be found in Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 1:27– “*But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.*” God sent Jesus to suffer and die for us because God loves sinners. This means that we have nothing to boast about, and we can take no credit whatsoever for our salvation.

When Paul informs us that God predestines us, this too is for a purpose—that we become the adopted sons and daughters of God. This too happens “in Christ.” Jesus is God’s eternal son, while we become God’s children only because God chooses us and then unites us to Jesus through faith. There is no sense here whatsoever that God was lonely without us, or that he needs our affection. God has mercy on sinners who deserve his wrath for one reason—he is loving and he has decreed that a vast multitude of rebellious sinners will become his beloved children. Apart from Christ this cannot happen. Every believer is an

adopted son or daughter of God, fully entitled to all of the blessings that Jesus Christ has secured for us.

The very thought of this moves Paul to a word of praise as we see in verse 6, “*to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.*” God’s Beloved is his eternal son Jesus. Because God is both loving and gracious he has united us to Christ through faith, created a bond between believers on earth and Jesus Christ in heaven through the indwelling Holy Spirit, so that we might, in turn, grumble “this is not fair.” No, Paul says. God announces this to us so that we who deserve God’s wrath will be moved to praise God for the glorious grace he has given us in Christ. Very likely, Paul’s words here reflect Psalm 66:2. “*Sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise!*”

In verses 7-10, Paul turns his focus away from what God did in eternity past to Jesus’ redemptive work as recorded in the gospels. Those who were chosen before the foundation of the world become the beneficiaries of Jesus’ obedience and suffering during his time on earth. What God decreed in eternity past, he accomplishes in history. In verses 7-8, Paul writes, “*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight.*” In Christ (here’s that theme yet again) we have redemption (an accomplished act) through his shed blood. The only way we can be forgiven of our sins is through the death of Jesus. The term used here for redemption was a word used of the purchase of slaves on the open market. The use of this word tells us that ownership is transferred because of what Jesus has done. In this case, Jesus paid the purchase price so that the power that sin had over us is broken (sin being the cruelest of all masters), because our debt has been paid. When Jesus dies for us upon the cross, he has now purchased us to be his very own. We are forgiven—not from some of our sins, but from all of our sins.

Paul makes it very plain that this comes about not because we are so wonderful in God’s eyes, but because God is gracious, Jesus accomplished all of this for us, and in such a way we should see that this has been lavished upon us in a display of God’s wisdom and insight. This reminds us that God’s plan of salvation was not the best of the many ways he could have possibly saved us, but once he determined to save us (which he was not bound to do), the cross was the only way God could do this to fulfill his loving eternal purpose, yet without sacrificing his justice.

In verses 9-10, Paul emphasizes the point that all of human history (including what Jesus has done for us) is the outworking of God’s eternal decree. In the work of Christ, Paul says, God is “*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.*” Our salvation in Christ is the “making known” of what had previously been hidden. What was hidden was the will of God and his eternal purpose. The very fact that God had such a purpose means that God does not watch what we do, and then respond. This does not mean that God only makes salvation “possible” for everyone who does what God commands (hypothetical universalism), an idea which mistakenly assumes people have the ability to do what God commands, despite their sinfulness.

Paul indicates that God has foreordained all things in fulfillment of his plan and purpose which centers in the person and work of Jesus. God does this at the precise point in time that which God has determined. Therefore, the mystery now revealed is that it was God’s eternal plan to send Jesus to unite (reconcile) all created things, whether they be things on earth or in heaven. The creator of all things (Jesus) will be the one to reverse all the consequences of human sin and rebellion. This is God’s purpose, and this purpose remained hidden until Jesus took to himself a true human nature, lived a life of perfect obedience, suffered and died for our sins, before being raised for our justification and then ascending on high. Everything that happens, Paul says, is part of God’s purpose in uniting all things in Christ. Christ is both

creator and redeemer. According to Paul, Jesus is also the Lord of human history.

In the third and last section of this passage (vv. 11-14), Paul moves from eternity past, to the work of Christ, to that particular moment in time when we each placed our trust in Christ. As we see in verse 11, Paul grounds all of the benefits we receive “in Christ” (i.e., in his person and work). *“In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.”* We have obtained an inheritance because we are “in Christ.” Through Jesus’ death and resurrection he has secured all of this for us. “In Christ,” we have been predestined according to God’s purpose, who is working everything (that is, all of human history, including our particular role in that history) in accordance with the council of his will, which is his eternal purpose. God is not passive, nor reactive. He directs and controls all things. He has a plan and a purpose. No wonder someone like Rick Warren in his book *Purpose Driven Life*, makes a huge point about God having a wonderful plan for everyone. But Warren then falls all over himself to reject the idea that God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass. How can God have a plan for everything, but not foreordain whatsoever comes to pass?

Of course, Rick Warren wants to say he is following Paul, but he certainly doesn’t want to be labeled a “Calvinist.” Yet Warren’s problem is not with Calvin, but with Paul who teaches the very thing Warren can’t bring himself to accept. The mystery now revealed is that “in Christ,” all those chosen have been predestined according to God’s plan, in order that they might believe in Jesus. Now, we may not like this. But if we accept the authority of Scripture, we cannot reject Paul’s point. The only reason why we are Christians who will receive all of treasures which are in Christ, and the reason why our next door neighbors will not, has to do with God’s eternal purposes. It is not as though we are better than our neighbors, or that we are smart enough to realize God’s purpose for our lives while our neighbor isn’t. It is not as though we are holier than our neighbor. It is likely that our neighbors are better people than we are. The only reason why we believe the gospel and our neighbors do not, is because of God’s purpose for us “in Christ.” We are all dead in sin. None of us can do anything to save ourselves. But God in his mercy, chose us in Christ, sent him to die for our sins, and then ensures that those whom the Father has chosen, and for whom the son has died, will come to faith. We, who have hope in Christ, are the prime examples of why our glorious savior alone deserves the praises of men. As he saves sinners, God is glorified and becomes the object of our praise.

Finally, as the passage reaches its crescendo in verses 13-14, Paul explains how God’s eternal purpose works itself out in our lives. *“In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”* When the gospel was preached to us (i.e. “When we heard the word of truth”) we were actually included “in Christ” at that time. Furthermore, when we believed we were indwelt by the Holy Spirit and sealed by him until the day God raises all of the dead at the end of the age. God chooses us “in Christ.” God accomplishes our redemption “in Christ.” God applies that redemption to us when we believe “in Christ.” Finally, the indwelling Spirit is the down payment and pledge that on the last day, we will be raised “in Christ.”

It is important to notice Paul’s treatment of this in Ephesians closely parallels the so-called golden chain of salvation found in Romans 8:28-30—*“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”* This notion that God chooses, accomplishes

redemption, and calls his elect to faith and then preserves them until the end is hardly incidental in Paul. It is a major theme. God does indeed have a plan and purpose for his people. And all of this, Paul says, “is to the praise of his glory.” Paul does not spell this out so much to refute an error, but to remind Christians of how it is that God has saved us. This sentence is packed with rich and profound theological concepts. Paul’s purpose is not only to instruct, but to fill our minds and our hearts with praise to God for the wondrous salvation that he has so graciously bestowed upon us.

What then can we say by way of summation and application?

Having gone through this entire sentence, the redemptive panorama is now complete. The Trinitarian pattern is intentional and obvious. Redemption was decreed by the Father before time began. Redemption was accomplished by Jesus Christ during his time on earth. Redemption was applied to us by the Holy Spirit when the gospel was preached to us and we believed in Jesus. Our salvation begins with God’s decree. It is accomplished for us by Christ’s death and resurrection. It is applied to us by the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the gospel. And this glorious salvation will come to fruition on the last day when God raises us from the dead. Indeed, we are sealed by the blessed Holy Spirit who ensures that we will be raised from the dead. The Holy Spirit is God’s pledge that all of God’s promises will be realized. God didn’t start this process with the intention of quitting in the middle of it.

Beloved, all of this take place “in Christ.” If you trust in Jesus, you are numbered among the elect. If you trust in Jesus, all of his saving benefits are yours. If you were chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and trust in Christ, then the Holy Spirit indwells you and will do so on that final day when the dead are raised. And there may even be some here today, who will make their calling and election sure, by trusting in Jesus just as Paul has described. And God does all of this to the praise of his glory, the glory of his blessed son Jesus! Amen!