

God's Glorious Grace

Ephesians 1:1-14

John Breon

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Most Americans today believe in God; we believe that there is a God (if you believe the polls). And I'm surely safe in assuming that most people listening to me here this morning believe in God.

So our question isn't, Is there a God? but, What kind of God do we believe in? What is God like? And, what's God up to? Does God have a plan,

a purpose—and what is it? How does it affect us? Do we have a part in it? How do we get in on it?

A further question we have is, Who are we? Who are we supposed to be? What kind of people are we meant to be?

God intends to have a people who will reflect his character and glorify his name. Ephesians describes God's plan from eternity past to eternity future. It shows what God is up to and how we can be involved. The goal in this first section of the letter is to move us and inspire us to praise God for his glorious grace seen in all the blessings God has poured on us in Jesus. We can see who God is, realize all that God has given us in Christ, appreciate it, and praise God. This letter also helps us understand who we are in Christ and how to live like we're God's people in Christ.

The letter opens with Paul identifying himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. It's addressed to "the saints." Already we see one of the letter's themes. "Saints" means "holy ones" or those who belong to God. That's who we are if we're Christians. If we're in Christ, we are saints, holy ones, the people of God. The saints are also called "the faithful." Our believing and remaining consistent in faith are important parts of being God's people.

The phrase "in Ephesus" isn't in some of the more important early copies of the New Testament. That means it may not have originally been written just to the church in Ephesus. Instead, it may have been a "circular" letter intended for several churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor. The letter may have become associated with Ephesus because it arrived there first or last in the circuit. Also Ephesus was the major city in that region. So this is a general letter from Paul to a group of churches, some that he founded and some that sprang up indirectly from his ministry.

As he usually does, Paul makes his letter's greeting a prayer for the readers to receive grace and peace from God. Most letters in that time simply used the word for "greetings." Paul used a similar sounding word that means "grace" to open his letters. Then he added the Hebrew greeting or blessing *shalom*—peace. The ideas of grace and peace will show up several times throughout this letter. They go together. When we receive and experience God's grace (undeserved, active and powerful love), we

have God's peace (right relationship, wholeness, well-being). God's grace and peace are always offered to us, always available to us. And we sure need them in these days, don't we?

In the Greek text, verses 3-14 are one long sentence of 202 words. It's almost like a hymn of praise to God. Paul is following the Old Testament and later Jewish style of an extended word of praise or blessing. He says, "Blessed be God...who has blessed us...with every spiritual blessing in Christ." The first "blessed" means praise—praise be to God. When it says that God has "blessed" us, it means that God has provided for us. What God has provided is "every spiritual *blessing* in Christ."

Eph 1:3-14 is a long, complex passage, but we can find three sections or stages in it. This helps us get a better grasp of what Paul is saying. He begins with the intention and purpose of God in eternity, moves to what God has done to accomplish his will in the world by the coming of Jesus and all that he did, then shows how that works in our lives in the now through the Holy Spirit.

The one God accomplishes all this. At the same time, we see each person of the Trinity involved in each stage of working out the divine plan. God the Father initiates and carries out his will in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Three times in this passage we find the phrase "the praise of." "To the praise of his glorious grace" (v. 6), "for the praise of his glory" (v. 12), "to the praise of his glory" (v. 14). Each of these comes at the end of a section that emphasizes the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. Still seeing the unity of this paragraph, we can break it down to understand it better. And we see that we are *chosen by God, redeemed in Christ, and sealed with the Holy Spirit*. Let's take a look at each of these realities.

Chosen by God

We all like to be chosen. It may be on the playground to be on a team. It may be when we apply for a job. It may be for some honor. It may be when we're asked the question to get married. Or it may be when we ask the question and the answer is, "Yes."

What could be greater than to realize that God has chosen us? He has. And God chose us not because we were good enough or smart

enough or pure enough. God didn't choose us because of anything we did or deserved. God's choosing began in himself, in God's own will and purpose and desire, in the eternity before he created the world.

Lloyd Ogilvie writes about a difficult week he had. It was one of those "Who am I, what am I doing here, is it all worth it?" kind of weeks. But at the end of that week, a friend said to Lloyd, "I want your life to be as beautiful as it was in the mind of God when he first thought of you" (*When God First Thought of You* 13). Wow! What did your life look like when God first thought of you? What kind of person did God have in mind when he first thought of you?

To discover that, let's consider who this God is who chooses us. He's, "The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." God blesses, destines, adopts, gives grace, redeems, forgives, reveals, and pours on blessings and grace. God has a plan, a purpose, and an inheritance. This God is able to accomplish what he plans.

This is the God who chooses us. And God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. His purpose in choosing is that there would be people in Christ who would become like Christ, holy and blameless before him in love.

Since God did the choosing in eternity past, Paul says that God destined us to become his children through Jesus Christ. Some translations say "predestined" there. Whole systems of theology have been built up around that idea. From the beginning, God predetermined that all who believe in Christ would be saved. "The plan of salvation to form a group of believers was foreordained, but the choice of individual believers to affirm or reject God was not" (Suzanne Nicholson, "Ephesians," *Wesley One Volume Commentary*).

The idea of predestination here is not that God decided beforehand who would be saved and who would be lost. It's not that God planned in advance everything that would ever happen. In creating the world, God put some limits on himself. Some things happen that God doesn't intend. Sin and evil, for example. We've seen a lot of examples of those lately. God didn't intend or cause them, but God is never surprised either. The emphasis is that God wants people who will love him, glorify him, and

reflect his character—people who will be like Christ. It's "in Christ" that we're chosen and adopted into God's family and blessed. When we choose life in Christ, we accept being chosen by God. Everyone who's in Christ is destined to be like Christ and to enter God's glory (cf. Rom 8:28-30). To be on the right airplane is to arrive at the right destination. To be in Christ is to be destined for glory (Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth*).

There's a moving scene in *Forrest Gump* when Forrest's mother is dying. She's been talking about destiny. With longing and pain, Forrest asks, "What's my destiny, Mama?"

For us, the answer to that question is found in Christ. He is our destiny. Becoming like him and living in him forever is our destiny. We can choose it or reject it.

Redeemed in Christ (v. 7)

The phrase "in Christ" (or, "in him," "in whom") appears eleven times in this paragraph. God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the one in whom God carries out his plan, pours out his grace, and gives all his blessings. God's eternal purpose is carried out in history through Jesus. God chooses to act decisively in Christ. We enter into what God's doing when we're in Christ. We experience all that God has for us in Christ. To be in Christ is to have faith in him and to know him as the living Lord who dwells in us by his Spirit.

Paul says that God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. "Spiritual" here means that the Holy Spirit gives the blessings and that they have to do with life in the Spirit. Here's a summary of these gracious gifts in this passage:

- [being chosen] to be holy
- adoption as God's children
- redemption—freedom from sin and death
- forgiveness—of our sins; this explains redemption
- knowledge of God's gracious plan to sum up all things in Christ
- the gift of the Holy Spirit

- the hope of glory (Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians. The Pillar New Testament Commentary*)

Verses 9-10 are key to this whole passage and to understanding God's plan. God has let us know the mystery of his will. It's that God's intention is to sum up all things in Christ. This points to the final fulfillment of God's plans and purpose; it leads us into eternity. Jesus Christ is the bottom line of God's purpose. God intends for all things in the universe to find their fulfillment and unity in Christ. God in Christ is out to break down barriers, to overcome rebellion, to heal brokenness, to restore the lost, to put all things right. In Christ these things are accomplished. If we want to get in on it, we need to be in Christ.

Sealed with the Holy Spirit

God the Father initiates the plan. The Father is at work in every stage. It's in God the Son that the Father carries out the plan. Our faith is rooted in God's action in Jesus in history. And it's in Christ that we find our part in God's plan and that the plan reaches its fulfillment. It's in God the Spirit that the Father continues to carry out the plan. God includes us through the work of God's Spirit.

Every spiritual blessing in Christ comes by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit makes real in us everything that Jesus did for us. Receiving the Holy Spirit is what makes us Christians. It's through the Spirit that Jesus comes into us and lives in us.

Paul uses two figures of speech to describe what the Spirit does in light of the rest of this passage. We're *sealed* with the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is the *down payment* of our glorious inheritance in Christ.

To receive the Holy Spirit as God's presence in our lives marks us as God's people. We talked about this a few weeks ago. There are various ways of looking at the sealing Paul mentions here. One is that in the ancient world, documents were closed with wax that was imprinted with the seal of the person sending the document. This meant that what was inside was attested and authorized by the one sending it. Probably the closest thing to

this today is when we notarize a document to show that we really signed it and gave our consent to it.

Another way to see the sealing is that in the ancient world, animals (and slaves) were marked by their owners. Branded, in other words. This was a sign of ownership and protection.

In more modern times, we might think of sealing as when someone is canning fruit or vegetables and seals the jar to preserve the food. The Holy Spirit covers and protects us spiritually.

The Holy Spirit in our lives marks us as being God's people, authorized by God and protected by God. If you want to know who you really are and who you're meant to be, you need God's Spirit living in you.

The other figure of speech Paul uses is "down payment." The word here is used only by Paul in the NT and it always refers to the Holy Spirit. It's a picture of the first installment of a payment that guarantees the rest will be paid. Paul calls it here, "the pledge of our inheritance" or "a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance." All of our experience of the Holy Spirit now—all the spiritual blessings in Christ, the fruit of the Spirit, gifts of the Spirit, new life, healing, guidance, and so much more—it's all just the down payment, the first installment of what God has in store for us. It's just the "foretaste of glory divine." If what God gives us now is more than we can ask or imagine (Eph 3:20), what must our inheritance in God's glory be?

The God we meet here in Ephesians is glorious, gracious, and exceedingly generous. This God is truly worthy to be praised. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." May we live "to the praise of his glorious grace."

I like a story I heard about a performance of Handel's *Messiah* that was broadcast on radio years ago. At the solo "I Know that My Redeemer Liveth," the soprano stepped up and sang beautifully. She sang it so well that the audience broke tradition and gave her a standing ovation (usually during *The Messiah*, the audience stands only for the "Hallelujah Chorus"). Then the maestro, the conductor, walked over to the soprano. He said to her, "You sang it beautifully. But do you know? Do you know that your Redeemer lives?" She said, "I think so." And then, "Yes! I know that my Redeemer lives!" "Then sing it like you know it." And they went back and

did that song all over. And this time, not just her voice and pitch were perfect. This time, she sang with confidence and an anointing that lifted the message of that song so that as it filled the auditorium it filled every heart. As she concluded, she burst into tears. Again the maestro stepped over to her and again his voice was heard through the microphone: "And now we know because you have told us—no, he has told us he lives through you" (Jim Buskirk, ORU Chapel tape, 1980 or 81).

Will we sing it, will we teach it, will we live it, like we know God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit? Will we allow him to tell the world through us? Will we live for the praise of God's glorious grace?