



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

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**“In Christ”
Ephesians 1:3-14**

If I had to choose my favorite of all the letters in the New Testament, it would probably be Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians is a little different from Paul's other letters. He seems to be writing to a group of churches rather than to one church or individual, and rather than addressing a specific situation or problem, he sublimely describes what God has done in our salvation and what that means for us as believers. Ephesians is a masterpiece—it's a beautiful declaration of what God has eternally purposed and accomplished in Christ, and how we in response should live, both individually and corporately as the body of Christ. Over the next couple of months we'll be spending some time in this magnificent letter. Today we're looking at Ephesians 1:3-14, a doxology about God and His glorious grace in Christ.

Now like Paul's other writings, Ephesians is a letter. So he follows the form of an ancient letter. His greeting is in 1:1-2. He follows his greeting with a thanksgiving praising God for all He's done for us in Christ.

Now usually in an ancient letter, this section where you offered a thanks or a prayer or a well-wish for your recipients was very brief. But in this letter, Paul expands it significantly. In the Greek text, verses 3-14 are one long sentence, one ongoing doxology for what God has done in Christ. Listen to it carefully and with a heart tuned to God's praise . . .

*Read text . . .*¹

A eulogy for God and His grace

What Paul offers here is a eulogy for God and His grace. The word translated **blessed** is the word we get our word *eulogy* from. It comes from two words that mean “to speak well of.” It carries the idea of bestowing a blessing on someone or acting graciously toward them.² When the word is used in reference to who God is, it's an expression of praise. When it's used about what God has done, it's a description of His grace toward us humans.

Now we usually associate a eulogy with a funeral, as a minister or family member or friend speaks well of the person who has died, praising the person as a way of celebrating his or her life. But you don't have to wait until somebody dies to eulogize them! And here, Paul was eulogizing God, praising Him for who He is—the **God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**—and for what He has done—who has **blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ** (1:3). Paul uses the same word for **blessed** to describe what God has done as He has acted graciously toward us **in Christ**.

Notice that—*in Christ*. All that God has done to accomplish His eternal purpose he has done *in Christ*.

In verse 3, God **has blessed us with every spiritual blessing** in the heavenly realms *in Christ*.

In verse 4, He has chosen us before the foundation of the world *in Christ* to be holy and blameless before Him.

In verse 5, He has **predestined us to adoption as sons** *through Christ*.

In verse 6, He has **made us accepted in the Beloved**, Christ.

In verse 7, it is *in Christ* that **we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins**.

In verses 8-10, it was *in Christ* that God set forth His purpose **as a plan for the fullness of time** (RSV).

In verse 10, he will **bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head** (NIV¹⁹⁸⁴) *in Christ*, gathering together and summing everything up into perfect unity. The word Paul uses here was also applied to addition. When the Greeks totaled up a column of numbers, they didn't write the sum at the bottom the way we do; they wrote it at the *top* of the column. They called the process "bringing to a head." In Christ, God will bring everything to a head in perfect unity.³ You might say that everything will all "add up" in Christ!

In verse 11, we have **obtained an inheritance in Christ** through God's great redemptive purpose in Him.

In verses 12-14, our hope and belief are *in Christ*—He is the object of our hope and faith. Whereas in the other uses of "in Christ" Paul is talking about how God has done these things *in and through Him*, here he's talking about how we place our hope and faith in Jesus Christ as we confidently trust Him on the basis of what God has done in and through Him.

And then in verses 13-14, Paul says that **in Christ, i.e.**, through Him, we have been **sealed with the Holy Spirit**. This seal is the mark of God's ownership of us as His people. And Paul says that the Holy Spirit is **the guarantee of our inheritance**. Paul is using the picture of an ancient custom that still exists in our culture today.

If you've ever gone through the process of buying a house, you probably know what I'm talking about. When we bought our house, through our realtor, we struck a deal with the owners. We made an offer, they made a counteroffer. We made a counter-counteroffer, and they accepted. Then when we signed the contract to purchase, I wrote a check for "earnest money." It was a guarantee that we would follow through on our offer. Paul says that the presence of the Holy Spirit in believers is God's *earnest payment*. In fact, that's how the KJV translated it for earlier generations: the **earnest of our inheritance**, or as the NIV^{® 2011} puts it, **a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession**.

The significance of Paul's praise

Now Paul is dealing with some pretty heady subject matter here. Election (1:4), predestination to adoption as God's heirs (1:5-6), redemption and forgiveness (1:7-8), the revelation of His eternal purpose that He has revealed in Christ (1:9-10), receiving an inheritance from God (1:11-12), hope and faith (1:12-13), being sealed with the Holy Spirit, who is the deposit on our inheritance (1:13b-14)—these are deep matters, and some of them very mysterious. But they are indeed significant!

Now some people get bent out of shape when we start using words like election and predestination. But they're here in the text, and we have to deal honestly with them. Please allow me to offer a few *observations* about these two ideas that are really intricately related.

First, we need to remember that Paul begins this letter using the language of worship to

describe what God has done in Christ. *God is always the right starting point!*

Second, we should understand that Paul describes salvation in this doxology *from the divine perspective* of God's eternal purpose in Christ. If he were focusing on human response and responsibility, he would be using terms like repentance, faith, and obedience. But here he's focusing on *what God has done and is doing in Christ*.

Third, it's helpful to understand that election and predestination are *pastoral doctrines* to encourage and challenge God's people. They involve *mystery*; they're beyond our comprehension. Throughout Christian history, there have been those who have picked these doctrines apart piece by piece to try to analyze and understand them. But just as picking apart a rose to understand its parts destroys its beauty, so the over-analysis of the Bible's teachings about election and predestination destroys the beauty and pastoral function of these doctrines. The New Testament, following the Old Testament, assumes and states these truths, but never seeks to explain them completely. And when Scripture is taken as a whole, they're always held in an appropriate tension with the Bible's teachings about humanity's moral responsibility and power of choice. Comments about election and predestination in the Bible are always found in the context of worship, encouragement, or challenge. They're family doctrines. As I once heard Dr. Mike Cogdill of the Campbell University Divinity School say, "The *basis* of election is God's love; the *outcome* of election is holy and blameless lives"

The significance of our response

You see, what Paul is talking about in this glorious doxology is *God's initiative*. It's all about what God has done, is doing, and will do for us and in us *in Christ*. We would never have turned to Him had He not taken the initiative. We would have continued in our sin and ultimately experienced eternal destruction. But in Christ, God has taken the initiative to bring us into a relationship with Himself, so that we might share in the inheritance of His kingdom when He brings all things together in Christ! He has done for us in Christ what we could *not* do for ourselves, because no matter what we do, it can never be enough to offset the sin of our rebellion against God.

John Ortberg tells about a special gathering in May 2009 at Azusa Pacific University. During the gathering, the university's president, John Wallace, brought out three graduating students who were going to spend the next two years serving the poorest of the poor in India. The students thought they were there just to be commissioned and sent out with a blessing. But then the president turned to them and said, "I have a piece of news for you. There's somebody you do not know—an anonymous donor—who is so moved by what you're doing that he has given a gift to this university in your name, on your behalf." He turned to the first student and said, "You are forgiven your debt of \$105,000." The kid immediately started to cry. He turned to the next student: "You're forgiven your debt of \$70,000." Then he then turned to the third student: "You are forgiven your debt of \$130,000." These students had no idea this was coming. As you can imagine, they were blown away that somebody they didn't even know would pay their debt.⁴

But God's grace in Christ is even greater! He wasn't moved by something good we did. We did everything *not* to deserve His kindness! Yet He lavished His grace on us in Christ! *So how should we respond to Him?*

Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan in New York City, tells the story of a woman in his congregation who was learning how challenging God's grace can actually be. He writes:

She had always heard that God accepts us only if we are good enough. She said that the new message was scary. I asked why it was scary and she replied:

If I was saved by my good works then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with “rights”—I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if I am a sinner saved by grace—then there’s nothing he cannot ask of me

This woman could see immediately that the wonderful-beyond-belief teaching of salvation by sheer grace had an edge to it. She knew that if she was a sinner saved by grace, she was (if anything) more subject to the sovereign Lordship of God. She knew that if Jesus really had done all this for her, she would not be her own. She would joyfully, gratefully belong to Jesus, who provided all this for her at infinite cost to himself.⁵

Indeed! You see, all that God has done for us *in Christ* He has done **to the praise of the glory of His grace** (1:6). He has set His love on us and redeemed us that we might **be holy and without blame before Him in love** (1:4).

In other words, His divine gracious initiative demands a human response. That response is repentance and faith leading to a life of loving submission, faithful obedience, and grateful worship.

Is that how *you* are responding?

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

² *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 322; *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart, Germany: United Bible Societies/Biblia-Druck, 1971), 75-76.

³ Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* in the *paideia Commentaries on the New Testament* series (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 47.

⁴ John Ortberg, in the sermon “Patch ‘Em,” Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, Menlo Park, CA (preached May 17, 2009); <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/april/1041910.html> (accessed 7/3/18).

⁵ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (Riverhead Books, 2008), 189-190; <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/march/3032210.html> (accessed 7/3/18).