

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

Ephesians 1:1-14

This morning we're beginning a new sermon series on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Paul had spent two to three years ministering in Ephesus from 53 to 55 AD during his third missionary journey and this was both his longest and his last major work of ground breaking mission. The letter was written by Paul from prison in Rome around 61 AD, although as we shall see later there is some doubt as to whether it was addressed solely to the church in Ephesus. Indeed the form and content of the letter strongly suggest that Paul intended it for a much wider audience than just the church in Ephesus [slide and explanation].

This letter sums up most of the leading themes of Paul's writings, together with the central motif of his ministry as apostle to the Gentiles. But it does more than that: it brings together the thought of the earlier letters in a new way; for many it's the crown of Paul's writings – it was Calvin's favourite amongst Paul's letters. John Mackay, former President of Princeton Theological Seminary said 'this letter is pure music ... What we read here is truth that sings, doctrine set to music'.

Ephesians presents Paul as "a prisoner of Christ Jesus" in the interests of the Gentiles and Paul sees an astounding token of divine grace in the fact that he, of all people, has been chosen "to bring to the Gentiles the good news of Christ's unfathomable wealth." Paul speaks of the "mystery" which was made known to him by direct revelation at his conversion so that he might communicate it to the Gentiles (Ephesians 3:3). The doctrine of the Holy Spirit plays a prominent part in Ephesians, in keeping with its centrality in Paul's teaching. Paul gives two perspectives on the Holy Spirit which are uniquely his, firstly that the Holy Spirit is the present guarantee of our coming resurrection and glory; and secondly that in the Holy Spirit

the people of Christ have been baptized into one corporate entity, united with Christ.

If you ever wondered whether life had purpose and meaning then the letter to the Ephesians will tell you what the purpose of our lives is.

So, having looked at Paul's letter in general terms, let's take a more detailed look at our reading today from the beginning of that letter. It's a wonderful introduction, Findlay called it a "magnificent gateway" and it's also been likened to a golden chain, a kaleidoscope, a snowball, a racehorse, an operatic overture and the flight of an eagle. If you'd like to follow in your own Bibles please open them at page [***], but in any event I'll put the relevant verses up on the screen. Verses 1 and 2 are a general introduction:

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Ephesians 1:1-2 NIV) Paul establishes his credentials as an apostle at the outset to give authority to his letter. He says he is an apostle of Christ Jesus, specifically sent and authorised by Christ himself. Paul uses his normal description of Christians; he calls them "saints" or "holy ones", set apart just as the Israelite nation had been set apart as God's holy people. That's not because Paul thinks Christians are actually good people, or because they do good works but because they have been brought into a new relationship with God through what Christ has done. Next Paul says that Christians are "in Christ" personally and vitally united to Christ, as branches are to the vine. For Paul to be a Christian is to be one with Christ and his people.

We can't be absolutely certain, but it's likely that the words "in Ephesus" in verse 1 are a later addition. In contrast with most of his other letters, Paul doesn't greet any of the many people he must have known in Ephesus. Even the letter to the Colossians, sent to a church with which Paul was not personally acquainted, is more personal from this point of view than Ephesians. Also most of the best manuscripts don't include the reference to Ephesus. But the verse reads awkwardly without any place name at all, so I believe that Paul

intended this rather general letter to be addressed to a number of communities of which Ephesus was one.

Moving on, Paul wrote what we now have as verses 3 to 14 as a single highly complex sentence of 202 words in Greek – a torrent of praise to God which he dictated without a pause – but that’s rather a large chunk to bite off in one, so I’m going to start with verses 3 to 6: “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 to be adopted as his sons 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.” (Ephesians 1:3-6 NIV)

Paul launches into a eulogy of praise to God, and the ideas come tumbling out. So, God is to be blessed because he has given us every spiritual blessing in His Son, Christ. That is, every blessing of the Holy Spirit has been given us by the Father if we are in the Son – that’s a wonderful Trinitarian statement. Note the word ‘spiritual’ as opposed to ‘material’ blessing. God does give us material blessings but he’s mainly concerned with our spiritual well-being because He’s planning for eternity. Even though Christians live on earth in mortal bodies, they can start to enter into the benefits of their heavenly inheritance here and now through the ministry of the Spirit as we shall see later when we look at verses 13 and 14. Note also that these blessings are enjoyed “in Christ”. Believers are not isolated beings; they live and receive their blessings in unity with Christ and the whole body of Christian believers, the church.

Verse 4 tells us that we were chosen by Christ to be His followers before the world was even created and verse 5 repeats that we were predestined. Predestination is a divine revelation not a human speculation. This doesn’t take away our free will though. Scripture clearly teaches both freewill and predestination. Even though the two things seem contradictory to us, in some way that we can’t fully understand they are both true in God’s realm. I think a part, but only

a small part, of this mystery is that God chose us corporately as a body of believers, yet there is clearly also an individual dimension here. All this is part of the mystery of our faith. This foreordaining and predestination are both in accordance with God's sovereign will formed before the creation of the universe. As Luther said, God's will has no "why", but God's will was exercised in accordance with His love as the beginning of verse 5 tells us.

Verse 5 also makes it clear that we become adopted into God's family through Christ's work on the cross. Predestination is to a relationship with God through Christ and what he has done. This affirms that God's purposes for us Christians are of the highest good and our response should be to praise and worship the God who has blessed us so richly. Predestination is a privilege, but it's also a responsibility. The divine purpose in our election was not simply to repair the damage done by sin at the Fall, but also to fulfill God's original intention for humankind, to create for himself a people perfectly conformed to the likeness of his Son. This holiness is progressively worked into the lives of believers in the power of the Holy Spirit and will be finally completed at the Second Coming of Christ. Formerly we were 'in Adam', belonging to the old fallen humanity; now we are 'in Christ', belonging to the new redeemed humanity. As the Book of Leviticus says (Leviticus 11:44-45) "You shall be Holy for I am Holy".

Paul now moves on to the theme of our redemption by and through Christ in verses 7-10:

"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. And 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 will have reached their fulfilment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." (Ephesians 1:7-10 NIV)

We see that we are redeemed through Christ's blood. The Greek word *apolutrosis* translated as redeemed was specifically applied to the

freeing of slaves or prisoners by the payment of a price. We were slaves to sin and have been released from its prison by the payment of a price – Christ’s death on the cross. So, redemption is not a future hope it’s a present reality. In verse 7, redemption is equated with *forgiveness*, for the redemption is a rescue from the just judgment of God upon our sins and the death which would have been our just punishment, but we are forgiven because Christ has paid the penalty that our sins – my sins and your sins – deserved. And this forgiveness is not through any works or merit of our own, it’s purely through God’s grace.

So, redemption, forgiveness and adoption as sons all go together and they are all due to God’s grace. But, remember these free gifts of God carry responsibility – you will remember from verse 4 that our adoption is so that we might be holy in God’s sight. To live our life in the conscious presence of our Father is both an immeasurable privilege and a constant challenge to please him.

Verse 9 tells us that God has already made the mystery of His will known to us. And what is that mystery? Well as we’ve already seen from verse 3, and as verse 10 tells us even more clearly, it’s to *be united with Christ* along with all other believers and indeed the whole of the renewed and transformed creation. At present there is still discord in the universe, but in the fullness of time, at the second coming of Christ, the discord will cease, and that unity for which we long will come into being under the headship of Jesus Christ.

Paul then adds another paragraph – verses 11-14:

“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 hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having 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.” (Ephesians 1:11-14 NIV)

Here Paul is making it clear that salvation belongs equally to the Jews and Gentiles. The structure of the paragraph makes this plain. The apostle moves from the pronoun *we* (himself and his fellow Jewish believers in verse 11) to *you also* (his believing Gentile readers in verse 13) to *our* inheritance (in which both groups equally share in verse 14).

Paul is also telling us that we are God's possession, we belong to him, we're his people, because he has purchased us with Christ's blood. He's telling us that all those who are in Christ, Gentiles as well as Jews, are now God's *klēros* or heritage, as only Israel was in Old Testament days.

In verse 13 Paul makes the mystery of predestination a bit clearer. It's clear that we can't say that the doctrine of election by the sovereign will and mercy of God, mysterious as it is, makes either evangelism or faith unnecessary. The opposite is the case. It is only because of God's gracious will to save that evangelism has any hope of success and faith becomes possible. The preaching of the gospel is the very means that God has appointed by which he delivers from blindness and bondage those whom he chose in Christ before the foundation of the world, the means by which he sets them free to believe in Jesus, and so causes his will to be done.

The assurance that God is active in the lives of His people comes through the Holy Spirit whom we are told in verses 13 and 14 is a "seal", a "promise" and a "guarantee". The Holy Spirit is a promise because God promises to give him to all believers. He's a seal because he marks God's ownership of us as his possession and authenticates us as true believers. And he's a guarantee because he's a kind of down payment guaranteeing God's promise to bring us safely into our final inheritance with God. The Greek word used here for guarantee, *arrabōn* signifies a down payment or deposit. So, in the Holy Spirit, God is not just promising us and guaranteeing us our final inheritance but actually giving us a foretaste of it, which, however, 'is only a *small fraction* of the future endowment' because

this down payment is only a small part of the total we shall finally receive.

Finally, right at the end of verse 14, Paul tells us *why* God has made us his people and lavished his grace upon us – it's for the praise of his glory. So this beautiful phrase tells us what we, as God's people, must do. Everything we have and are in Christ both comes from God and returns to God, it begins in his will and ends in his glory. For this is where everything begins and ends. To live to the praise of the glory of God's grace is both to worship him ourselves as the gracious God he is – not just by our words or singing hymns but also by our deeds, the way we live our lives, remember that call to be holy – and to cause others to see him and to praise him too. Let's all go out from here today determined that from now on we will live our lives to the praise of God's glory, remembering all that that means and involves. Especially remember what I said earlier, to live our life in the conscious presence of our Father is both an immeasurable privilege and a constant challenge to please him.