

What is it that You're Doing Here?

Ephesians 1:1-10

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ May 31, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Ephesians 1:1-10, NRSV)

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The story is told of noted English architect Sir Christopher Wren who was supervising the construction of a magnificent cathedral in 17th century London. A journalist in that day thought it would be interesting to interview some of the workers, so he chose three stone masons and asked them each this same simple question, "What is it that you're doing here?" The first replied, "I'm cutting stone for 10 shillings a day." The second answered, "I'm putting in 10 hours a day to build this wall." Neither answer was particularly noteworthy. It was the answer of the third worker, however, that stuck with him. The simple stone mason responded, "What is it that I'm doing here? Why, I am helping Sir Christopher Wren construct one of London's greatest cathedrals."¹

I hope you understand that the way we interpret the personal circumstances of our lives is profoundly influenced by the way we interpret our place in the larger context of the world. All three stone masons were doing the same exact work. The first one, however, is unable even to see beyond the bricks he holds in his hands. The vision of the second stretches only slightly farther, to the wall standing before him. The reason the third stone mason can speak of his work with such joy and purpose is that his vision extends far beyond the other two in that he sees his seemingly mundane contribution in light of a much grander purpose, the construction of a magnificent cathedral. And what was true for him is equally true for us. It is only when we gain a glimpse of the larger story that we find our small part in that story filled with purpose and joy.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians presents this sort of grand vision to us in the church. Ephesians has been called the "crown" of all Paul's writings, in part because it presents a marvelously concise, yet comprehensive summary of the larger story of God's work of salvation in this world through Jesus Christ. Ephesians lays before us the biggest story of all in hopes that we will see our place in that story and then find ourselves drawn into a vision of a cathedral that stretches far beyond the simple and often routine brickmaking of our lives.

The letter begins, as we just heard, with an outburst of worship and praise. In fact, in the original Greek verses 3-12 constitute one single complex sentence. Paul doesn't even take a breath. He's like a child who is so excited about something he's just experienced that he can't stop talking. The focus of his excitement is adoration. Paul begins his message where we all should begin, by recounting with grateful adoration the astonishing things that God has done for us out of love. This is, by the way, the heart of what we do here every Sunday. The point of our gathering in this room is to do what Paul is doing here, to retell the story of what God has done for us and to let that grand story infuse each of our small stories with gratitude, humility and devotion. In doing so we are like stone masons who want to make sure we never let the vision of the cathedral far from our minds.

¹ Source unknown

The grand story of God's mighty deeds which Paul recounts here has three parts. There is a past, what God has already done. Then there is a present, what God is doing now. Finally, there is a future, what God has promised to do and will, in his time, do. This means, of course, that we find ourselves in the midst of this great story which is continuing to unfold.

The opening line of the story is verse 3. Following his greeting in verses 1-2, Paul then writes, **“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.”** Now, if you didn't know anything else yet about this story, what could you learn from its first line? I notice two things right off the bat. First, this is a story about a family. God, we're told, is a Father and that Father has a Son who is called Christ. Second, this is a story about blessing. The word 'blessing', in fact, appears in some form three times in this opening line. Furthermore, the blessing, apparently, is directed towards the church. So, put these two things together and from its very first line we at least know that this is going to be a story about how the family of God extends blessing to God's people, the church.

As we walk through the following verses we will see that each of part of the story – past, present, and future – includes a different blessing which God extends to us. In the past we have received from God the blessing of being chosen. In the present we are experiencing the blessing of being adopted. In the future we will experience the blessing of being gathered up. As we walk through this passage together, I want us to take a close look at each one of these three blessings the family of God extends to us.

First, let's look at the past blessing of being chosen. Verse 4 reads, **“He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him.”**

Do you understand what it is Paul says here? The claim of this verse is so astonishing that we have to read it again to make sure we read it right the first time. **“[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him.”** If you are one of God's people, a part of his church, then God chose you to be so even before you were created. In fact, God chose us before *the world* was even created. And what did God chose us for? Paul is clear, before God even created the world God put us and Christ together in his mind so that we could one day come before him holy and blameless. God chose to make the church his delight and his beloved before those of us in the church even came into existence.

All at once this remarkable claim raises all sorts of hard questions, questions the church has wrestled with forever. Two come immediately to mind.

First, if God had to choose to make us holy and blameless in Christ, that then suggests that God knew there would be a time when we would be unholy and blameworthy. Right? If God has to decide to clean us up it must mean that at some point we got dirty. So here's the question. Why in the world would God create people he knew would turn against him after they were created? Think about a marriage. It's conceivable that you would try to reconcile with your spouse even after that person has proven to be unfaithful in marriage. Once you've got so much invested in the marriage it's worth making great efforts to save a marriage that is in trouble. But who in their right mind would enter into a marriage with a person they knew beforehand was going to be unfaithful? And yet, isn't this what God did? Apparently God created us knowing we would turn against him and become unholy and full of blame. Nonetheless, he made us anyway and predetermined that through Christ, he would eventually find a way to make us holy and blameless in the end!

At the very least we must say that this demonstrates how God's favor towards us is completely unmerited. Romans 5:8 declares, “God demonstrates his love for us in this that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Here we go even further. God also apparently demonstrates his love for us in that even though he knew beforehand we would turn against him in sin God still created us anyway and did so with a mind to making us pure in the end. As one commentator asks, could it be that perhaps God destined us for a higher dignity than even creation would bestow upon us. At creation we became his creatures. That's not bad. When he redeemed us out of sin, however, we became his sons and daughters!² If this is true, we may as well just resign ourselves to never being able to comprehend the depth of God's grace towards us. God apparently loves us to an extent that will never make sense to us.

² John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 39.

The second question this blessing of being chosen in the past brings to mind is this: if those in the church are chosen by God doesn't that imply that others outside the church are *not* chosen? Remember, Paul isn't writing to the whole world here. He's writing to the church, to Christians. That means he is saying here that *we* are the ones who are chosen before time began, a point I'm sure makes many of us uncomfortable. How can God choose some people and not all people?

It reminds us of how God chose the Israelites from among all other nations in the Old Testament, a choice which has made many people wonder if God plays favorites. Truth is, if we understand God's choice of Israel we will better understand God's choice of the church. Remember that when God first chose Abraham and his family, the ancestors of all Israel, God made clear at that time that he chose them not for the sake of their family alone but ultimately for the sake of all families on earth. In Genesis 12 God tells Abraham, "I will bless your family [from among all families] so that you will be a blessing, eventually a blessing to all the families of the earth."³

In a similar way God chose the church to receive blessings beyond what we could ever deserve. But understand that as a part of the church you and I were not chosen to be only *recipients* of these great blessings but also *agents* of these blessings. As we are going to see in a moment, God does not only intend to make us holy and righteous in Christ before him, but intends to do the same for all of creation. That means that the fact that God chooses us leaves no room for pride or arrogance. It does, however, leave plenty of room for responsibility and purpose in this life, as we're about to see.

These are hard questions surrounding this first blessing of being chosen. And granted, the answers given do not fully satisfy. They never will. Even the brightest minds in the history of the church have been baffled when they have tried to understand how God could have chosen the church from among all others before creation. Since the Bible itself never fully dispels the mystery, it is therefore left to us as a truth we must ultimately confess even while it is a truth we may never fully understand.

So let us confess it together, God has blessed the church in the past by choosing us in Christ even before the foundation of the world to be made holy and blameless before him in love. This is the first blessing of the past, one we will better understand as we examine the second blessing of the present, the blessing of being adopted. Paul writes in verse 5-6, **"He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."**

In Jewish thought of Paul's day it was commonly assumed that what happened to a king also happened to the king's people because the king was the representative of his people. A perfect example of this is when young David, who had already been anointed by Samuel as Israel's king, steps onto the battlefield to fight the giant Philistine, Goliath. You might remember that if David had lost that battle, the whole nation of Israel would have become slaves to the Philistines. Because he won, however, all Israel became victors with him.⁴ Again, what happens to the king happens to his people and what is true of the king is true of his people.⁵

Stay with me here. Jesus Christ is our King. He's the Son of the Most High God from the great royal family in heaven. This King, however, leaves his throne, comes to earth, and becomes one of us. Beyond that, this King then is condemned to death, to the death of one found guilty even though there was no guilt to be found in him. And if that weren't enough, this dead King is then raised to life and, still in his humanity, lifted, in glory, to the highest place God could ever give. Now, if what happens to the King happens to us and what is true of the king is true of us, what does this mean? It means that when our King paid the penalty of sin by going to the grave, the penalty for *our* sin has now been paid. It also means that when the King was raised to life from the grave because death could not hold him, now we too will be raised to life because neither will the grave be able to hold us, the King's people. As verse 7 declares, **"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us."**⁶

³ Paraphrase of Genesis 12:2-3.

⁴ Read this story in I Samuel 17.

⁵ I'm indebted to N.T. Wright for this insight in *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 6.

⁶ Italics mine.

Do you see the claim Paul is making here? Because what has happened to the King has also now happened to us, that means that what is true of the King is also now true of us. So what is true of the king? At least this much: the King is the beloved Son of his Father in Heaven. That means that now we are also counted as beloved sons and daughters of that same Father in Heaven. We're not natural born children, of course; we'll never share the same divine nature of our brother, Christ. But we are still children, adopted into this eternal family which means that we have been granted the full privileges and the full responsibilities of any natural born child. That is, after all, what it means to be adopted.

Some of you know that I was adopted as an infant. My younger brother Tom was not. He came to the family the old fashioned way. Nevertheless, because my parents were good and loving parents I never once was made to feel as if my place in the family was second class. Never once did my parents say, "Jeff, we're going to give Tom an extra-large slice of apple pie tonight because he is, after all, our natural born son." No, my parents generously provided for me just as they did my brother. They fed me the exact same food, sat through just as many of my Little League games, saved just as much money for my college education, and bought me just as many toys I really didn't need for Christmas.

Of course, being a child in a family isn't only about privilege. It's also about responsibility, and in this way my parents also never made me feel as if I was second class. As a kid I sometimes wish they would have. Unfortunately, however, never once did my parents say to me, "Jeff, we give Tom lots of chores to do around here because he's our natural born son but since you're only our adopted kid we don't feel like we can expect as much from you so run along and play outside." No, when my parents adopted me as their son that came with all the privileges *and* responsibilities of family. That meant my parents expected just as much from me in my school work, my chores, my behavior, and my character as they expected from my brother. When they corrected some behavior or attitude by reminding me, "Jeff, that is not how we go about things in this family", the indirect message was clear. I was, in fact, a full member of the family.

The gift of adoption into their family, with all its privileges and responsibilities, was a gift given to me by my parents that I did not deserve and for which I am forever grateful. How much more grateful we must be for the even more undeserved gift it is that we have been, through Christ, adopted into the very family of our Heavenly Father and given all the privileges and responsibilities of that family. Everything that the Father shares with the Son the Father shares with us, **"the riches of his grace that he lavished on us."** We have an unshakable status before the God of creation as his beloved sons and daughters in whom he delights. This is our present blessing, the way God sees us now, even though in so many ways we are still trapped in our sin. And all this is to God's good pleasure. It was God's destiny for us even before the creation of the world.

Once again, however, this adoption not only comes with full privileges but also full responsibilities. When you are a part of a family you take on the work of that family, and this where the third blessing comes in, the future blessing of being gathered up. In verses 9-10 Paul writes, **"With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."**

In this verse we are given the first hint of a message we will see Paul return to again and again in Ephesians. God has a grand purpose in history, a magnificent cathedral of sorts he is building. And though the story of this world is still being written, the final chapter has already been put down on paper. As we made clear earlier, the final chapter was composed before the first one was even written. Before the creation of the world God determined that his creation was to be one day brought before him holy and blameless in Christ. In other words, that which had been corrupted by sin and death was ultimately to be restored to purity and life. What we learn in this verse is that at that future time, in the "fullness of time" as Paul calls it, this restoration is not meant only for the church but for *all things in heaven and on earth*.

I noticed a phrase in the Gospel of Matthew recently I'd never noticed before. Jesus is traveling through the region of Gennesaret when word gets out that he is nearby and the people bring to him everyone in that region who was sick. Here's the line, "They begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed."⁷ It's the last part that struck me. *"All who touched [his cloak] were healed."* It doesn't say that only some who touched his cloak were healed. Some were not healed, of course. Those who didn't come and touch his cloak remained in their sickness. But all who came to Jesus and reached out in faith were, in the end, healed. The inclusiveness is extraordinary!

⁷ Matthew 14:36, NRSV

Paul's is saying essentially the same thing here. It is God's eternal design and good pleasure to ultimately move through his Son Christ to bring healing and life to everyone and everything he touches. In Paul's words, it is God's will to gather up all things in Christ, all things in heaven and all things on earth.

This does not mean that all people will be saved to eternal life. Tragically, they will not. There are countless times in scripture, even in Jesus' teachings, where we learn that many in the world will choose death instead of life and refuse forever to come and touch the cloak of the One who can heal and save. So what does it mean that it is God's pleasure that all would be saved? Not that every person will be saved but that every person is invited to be saved, invited into the family of God. And all who would come are welcomed with open arms as adopted sons and daughter with full privileges and responsibilities. But not only people, all of creation is meant to be restored as well. God may love humanity especially, but God also loves the rest of creation and so it is full cosmic renewal, a restoration of the whole universe, the liberation of all things from the curse of sin and death and decay, that God intends so that the whole universe might one day live in harmony with Christ and with itself.

This is where our responsibility as chosen and adopted sons and daughters of God comes in. As the church, we were not chosen in the past and adopted in the present by God only to be recipients of these blessings. No, the church was chosen and adopted to also be *agents* of these blessings to others in this world and even to the world itself! Now that we have been included in this family of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are to join in the mission of that family, which is the restoration of all things, the gathering up of all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. We're not just cutting stones for 10 shillings a day or putting in 10 hours a day building a wall in the middle of nowhere. No! We are now a part of a family which is at work building a grand cathedral! That vision changes everything!

Let me remind you that when Paul sat down to write this amazing vision that opens his letter of Ephesians he does so under house arrest handcuffed night and day to a Roman soldier. "And yet, though his wrist was chained and his body confined, his heart and his mind inhabited eternity."⁸ He's the third stone mason stuck in difficult circumstances but, nonetheless, full of hope and joy because he has a vision which carries him far beyond his seemingly insignificant spot along the wall.

How easily we become like those first two stone masons. The hardships of our daily lives and the seeming ineffectiveness of our constant labors can so easily keep our vision stunted, limited only to that which we see right in front of us. This is why we must continue to tell this grand story, this account of the ways God has blessed us in the past by choosing us, in the present by adopting us, and in the future by promising to gather us up. As we do, our present hardships are put into perspective and our wearisome labors are infused with hope and purpose. If we would just continue to share Paul's perspective, we would also find that we would share his praise. In fact, life itself would become an act of worship as we continue to bless the one who, in Christ, has already blessed us and promises to one day, through us, bless all of creation.⁹

Amen.

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The Next Step **A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application**

1. Read Ephesians 1:1-10. There is a lot here. What stands out to you right off the bat?
2. What do you think about this idea that you, as a part of the church, were chosen by God before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless?
3. How is it possible that a human being could be adopted as a child of God? Has this happened in your life? Do you see yourself as a part of God's family?
4. As an adopted son or daughter of God, what are the privileges? What are the responsibilities?

⁸ Stott, 44.

⁹ I'm borrowing some more language here from Stott, 45.

5. When Paul says that God's plan is to 'gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth', what does he mean? What does this include?
6. In your view, what is the most stunning and most unbelievable part of this whole passage? Is there a part you find hard to believe?
7. When Paul first wrote these words to the church of his time, what do you think was the main message he was trying to communicate? Is it the same message he would have for us in the church today?
8. Consider the story of the three stone masons working on the cathedral. In your life right now, are you more like the first two or the third?