

## Ephesians 1:1-14

Today we begin our four-week sermon series on the Book of Ephesians. Even though the letter to the Ephesians includes Paul's name, its actual authorship is disputed. However, it is clear that whoever wrote the letter, wrote within the Pauline tradition.

The letter to the Ephesians begins with a "eulogy", which we usually associate with funerals. In Greek, *eulogy* translates as "blessing". This "eulogy", like other Jewish eulogies, does not "bless" God but proclaims God as "blessed" because of God's acts of goodness and salvation for God's people. The word "eulogy," in simple terms means, "good word". Another way to look at "eulogy" is to think of it as an infusion of good things, good words, good actions.

The God who is blessed is the God who has blessed the Christians "in Christ". God's blessing in Christ means the lavishing on the believers of every spiritual blessing – even blessing in the heavenly places; so that God's blessing is cosmic in scope and nature. God is praised for both what God did before the foundation of the world or "cosmos", and what God has done, and is doing, in the context of history.

The author celebrates God's having chosen the Christians (us) who are not only chosen before the foundation of the world, but are predestined to be God's children through Jesus Christ.

He rejoiced in the revelation of the mystery of God, that is, God's purpose and plan expounded in Jesus. What God had planned to do from the very start was to act in and through Jesus, for the forgiveness of those who are chosen and believe. Now, God has made that plan known to all who believe. This redeeming work that is done in Christ, is cosmic in span, and includes "all things . . . in heaven and all things on earth". God's work is a cosmic reconciliation and God's plan has been revealed to us in Christ.

God intends to gather up *all things* into Christ, so that love, healing, wisdom, and welcome that we associate with Jesus will be the way the whole creation works. Our destiny and that of the whole creation to "live for

the praise of his glory.”

The word "blessing" may be used in two ways. It can mean either the gift, or the response to the gift. The author picks up both possibilities and says, "Blessed be God because God has blessed us with every blessing." This blessing by God is described in three important ways.

First, "in Christ" repeatedly points to Christ. God's self-revelation and saving activity have come to fruition in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Ephesians declares that Jesus is the focal point of all time and existence.

Second, with every spiritual blessing God has given to the church, with every possible good gift, God's generosity knows no limits. These blessings are "spiritual" because they are given and empowered through the Holy Spirit, who is at work in the church.

Third, "in the heavenly places" is a phrase that may be difficult to understand. In the first century the demonic forces were not pictured as being "down" beneath the earth. Rather, people feared that such hostile forces were "in the air", where they might come between people and God. To say that God has already blessed us "in the heavenly places" indicates that God has done so in the face of this spiritual opposition, and nothing is able to stand in the way of God's rich blessing.

God has "blessed us with every spiritual blessing" not simply because we asked or did anything to deserve it, but God did this before the world was created. Salvation happens through grace. Salvation is, from beginning to end, the accomplishment of God alone. So, God chose, destined, bestowed, showered, revealed, fulfilled, and accomplished all things, according to God's goodwill, plan, and purpose. Our fate is not in our own hands but in God's.

It is little wonder, then, that God's will is described as a "mystery" that has been revealed. Here, a "mystery" doesn't mean something difficult to figure out, but rather something that goes beyond human ability to discover; it must be revealed by God. Some mysteries, once solved, become

something that we grasp and comprehend making them far less interesting. This is not that sort of mystery. There are other mysteries which, even when we have experienced them, continue to be beyond our ability to comprehend fully and remain as much a mystery as ever. Such is God's grace.

Much about God's choice remains unexplained. It is part of "the mystery of God's will", which remains difficult to understand. God's choosing has always been difficult to understand. The author does not try to explain the inner logic or ethical reasoning of God's choice. Instead, he notes that it is a mystery, yet one for which we should give thanks.

We're invited to wonder at the ultimate mystery of God's will, namely that God, "will bring everything together under the authority of Christ, everything in heaven and on earth". "All things" should be understood to include not only humans, but all of creation. There is nothing that can stand in the way of God reconciling all things in Christ. There is nothing that can escape or resist God's reconciling plan.

Of course, the only appropriate response to all of this is praise of God, which frames this text at the beginning and the end. A life of such praise, through words and actions, is the life to which we are called, because it is where God intends to bring the whole cosmos.

God is praised for having chosen and adopted the church as God's own people. Adoption was not at all uncommon in antiquity. Among the elite, it served the important function of allowing for an heir if one had no children, or if one's children died. The adopted person, whether a child or adult, gained social status through association with the parent's social status, in the same way a biological child would.

In a similar fashion, adoption by God is a blessing for which the author praises God. It is an action planned by God and also pleasing to God ("This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.") It results in the praise of God by the adopted ones, who have a share in an inheritance from God.

The adoption indicated here is unique in that it is not the adoption of an individual but of a people. The author is not so much concerned with God's relationship to individual believers as with the claim that God has chosen a people for God's self. This people God has chosen includes both Jews and Gentiles as the author describes himself as part of a group that was "the first to set our hope on Christ", alongside the group that includes the recipients of this letter, "who also heard the word of truth...and believed in him". God graciously adopts not a single child or even group with just one ethnic or religious identity. Instead, God chooses and adopts a diverse group of people.

God's choosing and predestination do not function to draw lines; they are statements about God crossing the lines. The Jewish author is not saying, "God has a plan for your life." He is saying God has had a plan to welcome the Gentiles. God's choosing and predestination are not exclusivist claims. Rather, they are claims of God's great welcoming. God's preordained welcoming of the once outsider Gentiles is to be the basis of a new identity and of unity and reconciliation to one another.

Although God is the primary actor who is being praised, Christ appears to be just as important a part of God's plan for adoption. God chose us for adoption "through Jesus Christ". God gave grace "that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved". The Ephesians letter describes Christ's central role in the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles: "So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near ... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

The adoption of God's people is part of a larger plan that has been established in the past and has both present and future effects. Already God has gifted the community with every spiritual blessing. This is not simply a promise of future gifts to be experienced in heaven, but a present gift of spiritual blessings.

Similarly, the Gentiles are described as having been sealed with the Holy Spirit, likely a reference to baptism. "The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that we are God's own people.

He did this so we would praise and glorify him. The experience of transformation by the Spirit is “a down payment of our inheritance”. Believers participate now in something that is a preview of the gifts that will be realized fully in the age to come.

The centrality of “in Christ” repudiates other identities that create divisiveness and superiority on the basis of worldly evaluations, or distinctions along the lines of human-built identities. The identity and benefits in Christ, stated in the “eulogy” at the beginning of the letter, are the starting point for new life. Everything – everything – about their new existence is to be found “in Christ”.

God’s choosing and infusion of good things in Christ have a purpose, as in the purpose clause “to the praise of his glory”. The praise of someone’s glory was a vital part of the benefaction system in the Roman world where benefactors gave “graces” to those below them who were worthy, for the ultimate benefit of the benefactor. But here’s what rattles the system: God’s actions go well beyond the normal or even respected actions of a benefactor. God chooses people who are not part of the approved circles of benefaction, that is the Gentiles, for the purpose of adoption!

Recipients of benefactions were to praise the “graces” of the benefactor, so that the benefactor’s status would be glorified. The infusion of God’s goodness and the calling in Christ do not serve the purpose of proclaiming human triumphalism. The infusion of God’s good work serves the purpose of proclaiming God’s goodness, which ultimately benefits humanity.

Our God-given vocation is that of a "community for blessing". Churches exist to bless the neighbour, near or far; a potentially powerful counter-testimony against the widespread belief that religious folk are mainly interested in judging and cursing other people, not blessing them.

In Christ we are transported into a new world. Being "in Christ" re-frames everything: we see ourselves and one another, neighbour or stranger, in a fresh way. "In Christ" every experience is re-framed, from our most bracing joys and cherished achievements to our besetting temptations, our most anguished regrets, and our most wounding losses. "In Christ" we are joined

to the power and presence of God. "In Christ" we are knit to others who will cry over our dead with us even as they help us sing hymns of resurrection. At the same time, being "in Christ" is no sentimental togetherness. An "in Christ" community has to grapple with the fact that it will be perceived at times as more of a threat than a blessing. Part of the community's calling is to be a truth-telling, truth-living reflection of the God who has called it into being.

The divine act of election in view for the Ephesians writer is not the election of individuals but God's election of Christ, and God's choice for all of us, in him. Christ is the one who represents all humanity; thus in choosing Christ, God chooses all of us. God pursues humanity – all of us – with relentless love.

Those final lines of Ephesians are pure promise to us, the body of Christ, the church. As the head of the church, Christ is not up in heaven, letting the rest of his body run around like a church with its head cut off. The final promise of this Ephesians chapter is that Christ is in charge of all things in the church – Christ is running the show (though perhaps "behind the scenes"). "In charge" may mean that Christ is working even now to accomplish God's good purposes, seeing to it that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven – often despite human efforts to the contrary.

Perhaps Martin Luther was on to something when, speaking to a group of his fellow monks in Heidelberg in 1518, he offered the following proposition for debate: "The law says, 'Do this', and it is *never* done. Grace says, 'Believe this', and everything is *already* done."

**Amen.**

## Prayers for July 9, 2023

God of moon and sun, God of rhythm and constant presence, this week around the world, we gazed upon the fullness of the same moon. Just as we gaze upon the same You, when in our homes and churches, while together and alone. Your name is spoken in different languages and spoken without words in the silence of our hearts. We gaze and are gazed upon, flooded and filled with the gentle Light of Love. May all those who feel disconnected from the rhythms of thriving, who feel lonely and isolated, feel the constant pulsing presence of Your Interconnected Life.

May all those grieving loss feel the caress of Your comfort: those in Israel and Palestine among increasing deadly attacks; in Northern India, where ethnic clashes have become a “political battleground”; in the United States, where there have been 11 mass shootings in July alone; in Kenya, where 51 were killed and 32 injured in a truck accident; and continued violence and unrest in Ukraine and Russia.

May all those who are experiencing chronic pain, a new diagnosis, continued effects of long-Covid, hunger, economic instability, constant stress, relational disruption, unfulfilling work, and crippling depression – be given what they need, touching body, mind, heart, soul, and spirit.

May all those who yearn for your restoration, those disabled by addiction, those experiencing pain, those recuperating from surgery or medical treatments, find healing and compassion. We also lift up to you those who we bring before you with our lips or within our hearts.

May all those suffering in the drastic heat waves in China, North Africa, the Middle East, and many other places around the world due to El Nino and climate change be safe and given what they need. May we be motivated by this suffering and extremes to feel our interconnection and make changes towards a healed earth – like New Zealand, the first country to ban single-use plastic shopping bags.

May all those who feel the edges of a dream or longing be given the courage, creativity, and practical gifts to take a step towards what their hearts yearn for. May we allow for curiosity in our lives. May be open to new discoveries from the depths of ourselves – like researchers who discovered a rare octopus nursery off the coast of Costa Rica, only the third like it known in the world.

May we embody the bold voice of Nadia, the grandmother of Nahel, the 17-year-old who was shot by police in France, causing five days of riots and protests, who asked protestors, “Don’t break windows, buses, schools ... we want things to calm down.” In so many different languages and ways, we pray this prayer through our grief, pain, longing, and hope.

May Marion as she grows, learn of your love for her, and your support and compassion in the challenging times of her life. Teach her to love your creation, plants, animals, and people. Protect her in times of trouble. Guide her parents as they nurture her and surround her with unconditional love.

We pray for the calming light of the moon. We pray to you, God of all Light – within us and around us.

**Amen**