

WHY GOD IS TO BE PRAISED
Ephesians 1:1-14
(1 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)

You may have noticed that the last three psalms I've preached all included a note about praising the Lord because each psalm included verses to that end. And if you hoped that starting our study of Ephesians this morning would break that cycle, well, it does in one sense. There won't be a point in my sermon about praising the Lord. But that's only because after Paul's introduction in Ephesians 1:1-2 the entirety of our text in verses 3-14 are about praising the Lord, so you can't reduce it to just one point.

Ephesians 1:3 begins one long sentence in the Greek text that runs all the way through verse 14. And that sentence begins with a call to praise the Lord, as Paul writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 1). But it's not just that it begins with praise to the Lord, praise is mentioned throughout. Paul keeps bringing us back to the focus of this text, telling us in verse 6 that we've been made sons of God "to the praise of his glorious grace," in verse 12 that God made his people his possession so that they "might be to the praise of his glory," and in verse 14 that God has guaranteed to bring us to himself "to the praise of his glory." It's all about praise.

Paul gives us a summary statement in verse 3 (a thesis) that he then unfolds in verses 4-14. He 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." As Paul begins praising God he bases it on a reality that is true for all believers, namely, that God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. By saying "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" Paul is probably contrasting this with the physical and material blessings which we can see around us, some of which we do not possess. In other words, Paul is not focusing on some physical and material blessings that some of us might have and can praise God for having while others do not have and, therefore, could not join in this word of praise. Rather, he's focusing on spiritual blessings that all believers have, and by "the heavenly places," he's most likely referring to the unseen spiritual world instead of meaning that they are removed from us up in heaven.¹ The reason I think that's the case is because Paul uses this phrase throughout the book, and it seems to mean this elsewhere. For example, in 6:12 Paul refers to us wrestling against "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places," he doesn't that these spiritual forces are removed from us up in heaven but simply they are in the unseen world of spiritual realities. So it is here in 1:3.

Moreover, Paul tells us that we have *every* spiritual blessing as believers. There's not one spiritual blessing that our Heavenly Father has withheld from us. Therefore, when we consider Paul praising God in this text, there's nothing he's mentioning that we cannot also praise God for as well.

¹ John R. W. Stot, *The Message of Ephesians*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 35.

But before we get to these spiritual blessings that are ours and for which we should praise God, let me note two other realities. First, note how these blessings come to us through the work of our Triune God. Paul begins with God the Father, and he is the subject of basically every act of blessing that follows. But also Paul pictures these realities coming to us through our union with Christ. The phrases “in Christ,” “in Christ Jesus,” “in him,” and “in the Beloved” occur eleven times throughout verses 3-14. Finally, not only are the blessings “spiritual,” and thus signaling the work of the Spirit, but he is specifically mentioned in verse 13 as the one who seals us. So, these blessings come to us through the work of the triune God.

And, finally, all of these blessings have come to us according to the eternal purposes and plans of God. In verses 5, 8, 9, and 11 we’re told that God is working all of this according to his purpose, will, and plan. Therefore, do not think that you are a blessed child of God because God somehow accidentally stumbled upon or decided late in the game to bless you. You and I are his blessed children according to the eternal purpose, will, and plan of God which he set forth in eternity past, which has come to us in this age, and which will continue to be ours into the eternal age to come. Therefore, I think you could sum up this opening section of Ephesians by saying: *Our Triune God is to be praised because he has carried out his eternal plan to make us his blessed children so that we might be to the praise of his glory and grace.* Let’s flesh that out in the text under three headings of spiritual blessings. First, God chose us to be his holy, loved children.

God chose us to be his holy, loved children (vv. 4-6)

As Paul begins to list these spiritual blessings, he first takes us all the way into eternity past. He writes in verses 4-6: “Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”

Now, I know that’s a lot, so let’s begin by noting how Paul says that God chose and predestined us to be his holy children. Paul tells us that we are God’s holy children because before the foundation of the world God chose us to be holy and blameless before him and predestined us to be adopted as his own sons.² And he did all of this “according to the purpose of his will.”

In other words, if you’re a believer this morning, rejoicing that you belong to your Heavenly Father as his child, it’s ultimately because God purposed before the foundation of the world to make you his own. He chose you to be his blameless, holy child. Before the foundation of the world God purposed an eternal plan, and it included making you his child.

Now, if you’re a reader of the Old Testament, you know that this isn’t new. This is how God has acted throughout all of redemptive history. Among all the nations on the face of the earth he

² Note that he adopted us “to himself.”

chose one people—Israel—to be his chosen people to whom he'd make himself known. In text we heard read earlier, he speaks choosing Israel, saying, "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Deut 7:6). Then, he tells them why he chose them, adding, "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you . . ." (Deut 7:7-8). God tells them that he chose them as his own, and if they want to know why he chose them, they shouldn't look to any quality in themselves. He simply chose them because he loves them.

Then, in the New Testament, Paul speaks to all believers—whom he calls the "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16—and tells us that before the foundation of the world God chose us to be his holy people and predestined us to be his adopted sons, and he did it "in love" (v. 4b).³ He's applying this reality to all of us. He wants us to know that God chose and predestined us to be his holy adopted sons, but it wasn't because we were impressive in any way but simply because he loved us and purposed to make us his own before world was ever created.

Now, let me say a few things about this. First, this does not mean that you didn't also choose to repent and believe. You did. God's sovereignty never functions in the Bible to lessen human responsibility. We make significant choices. We preach the gospel and plead with men to choose to repent, believe, and follow Christ. But we're told here that God's choice of us precedes our choice of him. Before the world began, he'd already purposed according to his will to choose us as his holy children in love. Second, there's much more that we can say about God choosing us than I'm saying here, so I'm including a link to a sermon I preached on Romans 9:14-29 as well as multiple Sunday school lessons on God's providence and election in a footnote below.⁴ So I know there's much to say here that we can't say now.

But finally let me note why God has done this and revealed this to us. Don't we wonder this? Why would God choose us to be his children before the foundation of the world, or (even if he did it) why would he tell us about it? Wouldn't it be something he could keep to himself and none of us would be worse off for it? Paul answer this, saying that God did this in order that we might be "to the praise of his glorious grace" (v. 6). That is, he wants us—as his chosen, holy children—to praise him for his glorious grace.

³ Peter will do the same thing in 1 Peter 2:9-10, giving the titles to Gentile believers that the Old Testament applied to Israel, saying, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

⁴ For a sermon on Romans 9 that speaks of God choosing individuals to salvation, see <https://cccjackson.org/sermons/is-god-just-in-his-actions>. For three lessons on the providence of God, see (1) <https://cccjackson.org/lessons/god-s-providence-part-1>, (2) <https://cccjackson.org/lessons/god-s-providence-part-2>, and (3) <https://cccjackson.org/lessons/god-s-providence-part-3>. For two lessons on election specifically, see (1) <https://cccjackson.org/lessons/election-part-1> and (2) <https://cccjackson.org/lessons/election-part-2>.

Let me get a bit autobiographical here. When I first encountered this truth in the Bible, I bristled against it. I actually set out to read the whole of the Bible and prove it wasn't true. But the more I read the Scriptures, the more I saw it there. Finally, I remember one night, lying in my bed at Union, after finally being convinced that this was the teaching of Scripture, and I asked the Lord, "But why me then? Why choose me to be your child?" And it's as if the Lord said, "Now, you're beginning to grasp what grace is." And I wept and praised God for his glorious grace. I knew I didn't deserve salvation or even an opportunity to be saved. But God had shown me so much grace. And no matter how you understand verses 4-5, every believer—if we're going to align ourselves with the Bible—must be able to contemplate God choosing and predestining us to be his holy adopted sons before the creation of the world and praise God for it. Yet, there's more. God has redeemed us, forgiven us, and opened our eyes to his redeeming work.

God has redeemed us, forgiven us, and opened our eyes to his redeeming work (vv. 7-10)

As Paul continues, he mounts up reasons for why God should be praised, writing in verses 7-8a, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished on us."

It's not just that God purposed before the foundation of the world to make us his holy, beloved children, he also did everything necessary in history to make that happen. Here's what I mean. If God was going to make us his children, it required our redemption because in Adam we're all sinners, and each of us individually has rebelled against God with our sin. We were rebellious enemies of God, justly under his wrath. We owed him perfect obedience, gave him anything but that, and therefore were enslaved to sin and death as we awaited God's merciless judgment.

Therefore, if God was to carry out his eternal purpose of making us his blameless children, it was going to require an amazing, redeeming work. That's exactly what God did. In order to carry out the purpose of his will, he sent his Son into the world to redeem us from sin, death, and his wrath. Unlike us, Jesus did obey his Father perfectly. That's part of what we needed. If we are going to be holy and blameless before God as he chose us to be, we need the perfect righteousness of Jesus to be counted to us. But that's not all Jesus did. Paul mentions that "we have redemption through his blood." Jesus not only obeyed his Father in perfect righteousness, he also fully paid the penalty for our sin before God in our place. He bore the judgment of God for sin in our place. That's why Jesus shed his blood on the cross. And by paying our penalty, he redeems us from slavery to sin and death and from God's wrath—bearing all of that for us—so that we are now forgiven of our sins. And all of this was by his grace, which he lavished on us. We didn't deserve what God did in Christ in order to redeem us and forgive us of our sins. It was simply an outflow of his grace being lavished on us. As God's adopted children, we have been redeemed and forgiven of our sins. But that's not all.

In verses 8b-10 Paul also mentions that God has opened our eyes to the redeeming work of Christ. Paul adds that in all wisdom and insight God made known to us the mystery of his will.

You see, God's plan for his Son to reign over all is seen in the Old Testament, but it becomes clearer in the new, and the Lord has opened our eyes to see his redeeming plan "to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (v. 10).

But what does Paul mean by "all things"? It obviously doesn't mean that Jesus is redeeming every person so that everyone will be forgiven of their sins and have eternal life. Rather, I think by "all things" he means the whole of the creation itself. We know Adam's sin affected all of humanity as we were made sinners. But it wasn't humanity alone that was affected. Rather, God subjected the entire creation to futility (Rom 8:20). Since the fall the creation bears thorns and thistles. There are earthquakes, tsunamis, and famines. And if a wolf is in the company of a lamb, well, it's an ugly scene.

But the Scripture also promises that this created order was subjected in hope that one day it might "be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). In other words, as we get to be raised and have new resurrected bodies, no longer subject to decay, so on that day that we are raised will the created order itself be set free from its bondage to decay and be made new. That's why Paul says that the created order itself is longing for the redemption of *our* bodies (Rom 8:23).

And all of this is going to happen because of God's redeeming plan was for Jesus to reign over his resurrected people and a redeemed cosmos forever. When all things are united in him, under his reign, then the whole created order itself will be made new. No more thorns and thistles, earthquakes or tsunamis, and the wolf and lamb will lie down together. So not only had the Lord redeemed us and forgiven us but also has opened our eyes to the glory of his cosmic work of redemption. Yet Paul doesn't stop there. Finally, we can say that God has claimed us as his promised possession.

God has claimed us as his promised, protected possession (vv. 11-14)

We see this truth in verses 11-14, but I want to note that these verses could be saying one of two things because they could legitimately be translated one of two ways. They could be translated just like the ESV does where you can see that verses 11 and 14 both speak of us having an inheritance that we await and is guaranteed for us. That's biblically true. The Bible speaks of us being co-heirs with Christ who is the heir of all things. So that could be what these verses are saying, and it would fit right after noting that Jesus is going to make this current heavens and earth new, uniting all things in him. That could be what it's saying, and even if it's not, that is a biblical truth.

But you could also translate verses 11 and 14 as if we ourselves are God's inheritance, heritage, or possession. That's a legitimate translation as well. Verse 11 could be translated as something like, "In whom also we have been made a heritage," and verse 14 could be translated as something like, "who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession." Again, that is also biblically true. We are God's "own possession" according to 1 Peter 2:9.

So, which is it talking about here? I think it's talking about us being God's heritage, inheritance, or possession for a few reasons. First, almost all commentators agree that this is the best way to translate these verses. Second, God speaks of his people in the Old Testament this way. In Deuteronomy 7:6, 9:29, and 32:9, Israel is spoken of as God's treasured possession and heritage. And in light of how Paul has already applied truths of Israel in the Old Testament to us, it seems likely he's doing that as well here. But a third reason is because of the picture of the Spirit sealing us. Paul writes in verses 13-14, "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession." Now what does it mean that the Holy Spirit seals us? Well, this too has biblical precedent.

In Ezekiel 9, the Lord is about to execute judgment on Jerusalem. However, before doing so, he has those who sigh and groan about the sins committed all over the cities (i.e. the Lord's true people) to be marked so that they might be spared. So, we read in Ezekiel 9:3b-6a, "And he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his waist. And the LORD said to him, 'Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.' And to the others he said in my hearing, 'Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark.'"

Then, this same reality comes up again in Revelation 7. In that chapter, the angels are about to unleash God's judgment on the earth that fills the entire age from Christ's ascension to his return. But before they do, John writes, "Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the earth and sea, saying, 'Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads'" (Rev 7:2-3).

Do you see? It's the same reality that happened in Ezekiel 9. God's judgment is all over this world. We've already mentioned seeing it in the decaying nature of the created order itself. We see it in God giving people over to their sins and with the demonic torment that takes place. And yet we've been marked out. He put his seal on us, saying, "That one is mine. That one will not be ultimately destroyed." He has laid claim to us because he's going to take possession of us. That's what verses 11-14 are saying. We're God's treasured possession. He's put his seal on us through his Holy Spirit, and nothing is going to stop him from bringing us to himself and taking possession of us to be with him forever.

So Paul has stretched from eternity to eternity. God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. In eternity past he chose and predestined us to be his holy, blameless children. In this age he sent his Son to shed his blood so that we might be redeemed and have forgiveness of sins. He showed us his plan to redeem the entire created order under the reign of Jesus Christ. And he has sealed us with his Spirit, guaranteeing that nothing will keep us from being with him forever as he comes to take possession of us as his own treasured possession. Do you feel how secure

we are in Christ? That's reason to praise God as Paul does here. And it's reason for us to thank our great God as we come to the table this morning. Amen.