

Ephesians 1:1-14

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. Today's selected text is almost unfathomably deep. First, its verses comprise one long sentence in Greek, and the longest sentence in the Bible. So, translators have had to split it up into shorter phrases. The sentence exhibits a flowing style valued in Hellenistic rhetoric, but unmanageable in English translation. The lyricism of this poetic, hymnic exultation that bids us bless the God who blesses all has been a great challenge for the translator.

The author begins the letter with a "eulogy" - the Greek word we translate 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 his people. The word "eulogy," in simple terms means, "good word." The context of most Jewish eulogies clearly suggests that God's "blessings" are more than just good words for us. Another way to look at "eulogy" is to think of it as an infusion of good things, good words, good actions.

The opening words, "Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ", are similar to a Jewish "berakah" or word of praise for God. Remarkably, 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 the blessing of God is even cosmic in scope

and nature.

The author offers praise to God 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. Initially, the author celebrates God's having chosen the Christians or "us". The Christians are not only chosen before the foundation of the world, they are predestined to be God's children through Jesus Christ. The author rejoiced in the revelation of the mystery of God, which is God's purpose and plan that is set forth in Jesus Christ. In other words, what God had planned to do from the very start was to act in and through Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of those who are chosen and believe -- and now God has made that plan known to those who believe. The striking thing about this redeeming work that is done in Christ is that it is cosmic in span, including "all things . . . in heaven and things on earth." God's work aims as a cosmic reconciliation and this plan of God has been revealed to Christians in Christ.

God intends to gather *all things* up into Christ, so that love, healing, wisdom, and welcome that we associate with Jesus will be the way the whole creation works. This is 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 it. Here, 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 (all of them beginning with the same Greek preposition which can be translated as either "in" or "with.")

First, "in Christ," repeatedly points to Christ in almost every verse. God's self-revelation and saving activity have come to clear focus in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Too often we reduce our picture of Jesus to something comfortable. Ephesians gives us a better perspective, and declares that Jesus is the focal point of all time and existence.

Second, "in" or "with" every spiritual blessing," God has given to the church every possible good gift, and 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," a phrase that may be the most difficult of the three to understand. Unlike some current ways of imagining spiritual geography, 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 such spiritual opposition, and thus nothing is able to stand in the way of God's rich blessing.

God has "blessed us with every spiritual blessing" not simply before we asked or did anything to deserve it, but before the world was created. This is an indication of how seriously Ephesians takes the claim that salvation is by grace. This text consistently maintains that salvation is, from beginning to end, the accomplishment of God alone. So, we hear that God chose, destined, bestowed, showered, revealed

fulfilled, and accomplishes all things. All of this has happened according to God's good pleasure and will, plan, and purpose. This is good news! Our fate is not in our own hands but in God's, and God in mercy and love refuses to be limited by our abilities to produce death.

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. There are some mysteries which, once solved, become something that we grasp and comprehend (like the answer to a crossword puzzle), and so they become far less interesting. That is not the sort of mystery being talked about. 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.

There is much about God's choice that remains unexplained. It is part of "the mystery of [God's] will," which remains difficult to understand even though God has made it known. The fact of 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

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“will bring everything together under the authority of Christ – everything in heaven and on earth”. “All things” should be understood with the widest possible meaning, including 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, and that includes any forces or powers that might worry the readers. There is no reason for the church to feel timid or afraid in the face of momentary opposition; God’s intent is clear in Christ: redemption as God’s own.

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 (who could be a child or an adult) gained social status through association with the parent’s social status. In the same way a biological child would, the adopted child benefited from the social and political connections of their parent. They also gained wealth through their inheritance. In return the adopted child honoured the parent through taking the parent’s name and being loyal to them.

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 language echoes the stories of God choosing Israel, and the purpose of being chosen for “redemption” evokes God’s release of Israel from slavery. And, all of the relevant verbs and pronouns (we, us) in the passage are plural. 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. At the end of the passage the author describes himself as part of one group that was “the first to set our hope on Christ,” alongside another group including the recipients of the letter “who also heard the word of truth...and believed in him.” God graciously adopts not a single child or even a group with 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 author is not saying, “God has a plan for your life.” He is saying God has had a plan to welcome the Gentiles, and the Jewish author uses the pronoun “us” – showing he has no problem saying that he is also part of them! God’s choosing and predestination here are not exclusivist claims. In this context they are claims of God’s great welcoming. In relation to the letter as a whole, 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 praised in these verses, Christ appears throughout the passage as an important 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 letter will go on to describe 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." God's will is revealed through the death of Jesus as a choice of one people composed of two groups that previously were hostile to each other.

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 in the heavenly places. 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 he has purchased us to be his 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" decentres all other identities that create

divisiveness and superiority on the basis of worldly evaluations, or distinction along the lines of human built identities. The identity and benefits in Christ, stated in this “eulogy” at beginning of the letter are not the end-point of God’s work in and through Christ; they 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. The purpose clause “to the praise of his glory” is repeated three times. 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. 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 (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. Such praise does not happen within the comfortable walls of the church. It was and should be public declaration and “advertisement” of the goodness of the giver, so that all may know they’ve been chosen by God, adopted, and reconciled to God and to one another.

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 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. For if Christ is the head of the church. Christ is not up in heaven, letting the

rest of his body run around like, well, a church with its head cut off. Though it may appear that bishops and pastors are in charge (or not), the final promise of this Ephesians chapter is that Christ is in charge of all things in the church. Could it be that "in charge" here means that Christ is running the show (though perhaps "behind the scenes")? Could it be that "in charge" here means 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.