

Ephesians 1:1-14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ephesians chapter 1 verses 1 to 14 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.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

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 we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

The book of Ephesians was likely an apostolic encyclical, a circular letter sent to various churches in the region of Asia Minor. Unlike other Pauline epistles, it does not greet anyone, and besides Paul, only mentions the name of Tychicus, who is its bearer.

[1 : 4 7] There is no treatment of specific issues in a congregation, and it deals with the more general themes of the gospel message. It is possible that it is the letter referred to as the letter from the Laodiceans, in Colossians chapter 4 verse 16.

In Marcian's canon, the epistle to the Ephesians is referred to as to the Laodiceans. The form of verse 1 suggests that some reference to a place name was contained in the original.

We might speculate that it was left blank in the master copy of the encyclical, and filled in differently for whichever church it was addressed to. Presumably, the Ephesians copy of this more general encyclical is the one that has come down to us in scripture.

Some have suggested that the association with Ephesus might have arisen from the fact that Ephesus was a particularly important city for the early church. Paul visited it on a number of occasions, a few of which visits are recorded in Acts chapter 18-20.

It was a larger city with a sizable Jewish population. The careful reader of Ephesians will be struck by a number of close parallels between the letters of Colossians and Ephesians. There are several chunks that are substantially similar in both.

[2 : 5 2] Almost the entirety of Ephesians chapter 1 is just two sentences. Verses 3-14 is a single 202 word sentence. It's the longest in the entirety of the Pauline corpus.

Paul begins the epistle in a very familiar manner. He identifies himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus. He is someone sent on a divinely appointed mission. He wishes grace to them and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, a typical Pauline greeting.

The sentence that comprises the entire rest of our section is introduced with the words Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a statement of praise, adopting a form that could be found in synagogue worship and elsewhere.

The opening clauses are all about blessing. Paul blesses God the Father because God the Father has blessed us in Christ and he has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

The extent of the blessing is remarkable. Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places suggests that there is no spiritual blessing that we lack. These blessings are spiritual, coming from the Spirit of God.

[3 : 56] They are granted and enjoyed in Christ. Christ is the realm to which these blessings belong. God's blessings go all the way back to the very beginning. God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

It is important that we pay attention to what Paul is saying here. When we read such statements, we can often instinctively translate them into abstract theology. Paul is teaching, we suppose, the doctrine of election, that God elected a certain set of individuals before the foundation of the world.

But Paul isn't speaking about certain individuals here. He is speaking about us. Election isn't about an abstract group of individuals of unknown identity in this place. It's about the church.

God chose the church in Christ before the foundation of the world. A further thing to notice is that this isn't just about some timeless way of salvation. The people who were chosen are not all believers throughout all ages, but the people of God formed in Christ in the fullness of time.

The point that Paul is making here is that the in-Christ people that God has intended to form from the very beginning, from before the very beginning, has now at this very point in history been unveiled.

[5 : 06] Now we see, revealed to the entire world, God's long hidden purpose. God's choice of us was for a purpose, in order that we might be holy and without blame before him.

We are a people who have been set apart to God, so that we might live renewed lives that bear the mark of his holiness. Paul's statement about election here might remind us of the sorts of statements that we find in the Old Testament, in places such as Deuteronomy chapter 7 verses 6 to 8.

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.

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 and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

At the heart of the doctrine of election that Paul presents here, as in the case of Moses' account of election in Deuteronomy, is the great and utterly unmerited grace of God.

[6 : 14] We were chosen, but there was nothing in ourselves to merit that choice, nothing that would distinguish us from anyone else so as to make us fitting recipients of God's goodness. Although many people focus Paul's doctrine of election upon individuals, I think this is misguided, especially at this point.

The focus is upon the new Jew and Gentile people of God formed in Jesus the Messiah. Moses' teaching about election was about God's choice of a body of people, not so much of the individuals that comprised it.

And I think the same is true about Paul's. As we are in Christ, we find ourselves bang in the centre of the great story of the entire cosmos. But that story was always about Christ and God's eternal purpose to form a people in him, rather than about God choosing a certain set of individuals, and then determining that Christ would be the means to redeem them, as some have supposed.

God's intent underlies everything else. God's purpose was not merely concerned with the end of our being a holy and blameless people before him, but with the means by which this would be achieved.

By God's will, he carries out his intentions and will bring them to their desired end. If election chiefly concerned the end of the purpose, predestination concerns the means.

[7 : 28] And the means is adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ. Our status as a chosen and holy people is achieved as we are adopted through Jesus Christ, being made to participate in his sonship.

The blessings that we enjoy are enjoyed in Christ, the beloved Son. He is the elect one, revealed in the fullness of time for us, so that we might enjoy the status of sons.

And we have security in God's purpose and the sovereignty of his grace. God will realise his purpose planned before the ages began, and he will bring it to a certain completion.

And we are going to be beneficiaries. Christ is at the heart of the entire purpose of God. In Christ, we have redemption through his blood that has been shed for us. We were rescued by his cross.

Our debt was paid. We were bought back for God. In Christ, we have forgiveness of our trespasses. All the charges that were against us have finally been dealt with, all according to God's immense grace which he has lavished freely upon us.

[8 : 29] In Christ, the mystery of God's will is made known, in a way that brings us into possession of deep wisdom and insight. In Christ, God's great plan for the cosmos, to unite all things in him, has been unveiled.

In Christ, we have an inheritance, or perhaps are an inheritance, God's own possession, by the secure operations of the God who works all things according to his will.

God is going to fulfil his purpose. He is not going to fail. And this will all be to the praise of God's glory. We were made participants in all of this when we heard the message of Christ, as we heard of his lordship and of his kingdom, and as we believed in him responding to that message.

We were sealed with the Holy Spirit, marked out as those who will receive the full inheritance. The Spirit is a down payment or a guarantee of a greater inheritance that still awaits us.

Once again, this is all to the end of God's glory. Christ is at the very heart of this account of salvation. At every single step of the process of God's grace being worked out, it is in Christ.

[9 : 35] From the very beginning, when we are chosen in him before the foundation of the world, to the time of final realisation, when all things are gathered together in Christ, the entire portrait of God's cosmic purpose, of which salvation is just a part, is all drawn around Christ.

Christ is the one in whom the will of the Father is being worked out. Do we want to know what God's will is? We must look to Christ. Christ is the one in whom the will of God is revealed.

Do we want to know who are chosen? The people who belong to God. Look to Christ. If we are in Christ, it is in him that we will find certainty of our election. Do we want to know if we are loved by God?

Look to Christ. He is the beloved. If we are in him, then we have every spiritual blessing in him. We are granted by God's grace to participate in the love with which the Father loves him.

And all of the work of Christ redounds to the glory of God. It leads to the praise of the Father. Everything comes from the Father, from his purpose. It is achieved in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, the one who seals us.

[10 : 43] And then it leads back to God the Father, in the praise of his glory that arises from all of these things. A question to consider.

What difference does it make to draw a portrait of election around Christ?