

EPHESIANS

“Blessed in Christ”

Ephesians 1:1-14

Sunday, August 12, 2018

By David A. Ritchie

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

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

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

³ 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, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹¹ 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, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ 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, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. ¹

Introduction

In recent years, I have found that the strategic avoidance of news stories to be almost a spiritual discipline. I desire to be informed, but so much of the news today can be very heavy and disheartening and discouraging for my soul. However, I was encouraged this last week when I encountered a surprising story of hope shining in the darkness – the story of the transformation of a man named Ken Parker (perhaps you’ve read this story too).

This time last year, Ken Parker was a KKK grand wizard and neo-Nazi ([show images 1 and 2 of Ken Parker](#)). Exactly one year ago this weekend, he participated in the deadly white-nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia that resulted in one death and national division. By Parker’s own admission, his entire identity and life was built on hatred.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Eph 1:1–14.

But since that time, Mr. Parker's life has undergone transformation. He met a black man named William McKinnon at a cookout outside of the pool at his apartment complex. And as soon as he met him, he knew that something was different about him. Soon Mr. Parker found out William was a pastor of a church, and he accepted William's invitation to visit his primarily black church. There he encountered the word of God proclaimed for the pulpit and he encountered the love of God embodied by the people. And he found that he could not get away.

Easter Sunday of this year, Ken Parker quit the Ku Klux Klan and became a Christian. Last month, he traded his Klan robe for a baptismal robe. You can see him here being baptized by his pastor ([show image 3 of Ken Parker](#)).

What strikes me about this story is how much it gives hope, not just to Christians, but even non-Christians. Every day, we are inundated with stories of division, hatred, warring ideologies, and shouting matches. But here we have a story of transformation. It naturally provokes the question: what can account for a transformation like this? Is there really a truth that is so beautiful and a love that is so real that if believed and encountered it could change someone at the very core of their identity? If so, what is this truth that transforms life so much?

That is what the book of Ephesians is about.

Ephesians is an Epistle or an ancient letter. It is written by the Apostle Paul in prison, as he looks death in the eye. It is his final message to the church of Ephesus; a church he loved; a church he planted; a church he taught for three years, with rich gospel teaching; a church now with a new generation of Christians Paul has never met; mostly from gentile heritage; a church with a massive influence in the region and even the world.

This letter serves as a reminder of all he taught before. It is a review of the doctrine and duties of the gospel: what the truth of the gospel is, and its implications for life, for the church, and for the world.

And how will he begin? With uncontrollable worship. As one scholar notes, "Ephesians 1:3–14 is one long sentence (of 202 words)."² In my opinion, it is the most glorious run-on sentence in the history of all literature. Paul is so excited about what God has done for his people in Jesus Christ that he can barely catch his breath.

At its most basic level, Paul begins his letter with a summons and a call to worship. He wants to bless the God who has blessed him so much, and he wants Christians to do the same; to praise God, to extol him, and glorify him forever.

Why? Because he blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

How? This passage shows us; he has blessed us in seven extraordinary ways.

² Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 90.

Exposition

1.) He chose us to be holy and blameless.

What does it mean to be God's chosen people, or to believe you are chosen? Does it mean we should be prideful or think we are better than other people? Is it like God is in gym class picking a team and you better hope you are good enough to get on his team?

Not at all.

When we think of being chosen by God, we shouldn't think about how we or our culture might interpret the word "chosen," but rather how the word of God uses this word. And when the Bible becomes our paradigm, we will see very clearly, we should think in terms of ancient Israel.

The Old Testament teaches us about how the nation of Israel became God's chosen people. And the Bible is very clear that they were not chosen because of their goodness, but because of God's grace.

This is Moses speaking in the book of Deuteronomy: *"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 ..."* (Deuteronomy 7:6–8a, ESV)

Paul is saying, we should think of ourselves in this way. Like Israel was chosen and treasured because of grace, so too, if you are a Christian, you have been chosen and treasured by grace.

And this grace has a purpose. We were chosen for a purpose. We were chosen to be holy and blameless; to be set apart for the purposes of God to be displayed through our lives. N.T. Wright says, "...the point is that we aren't chosen for our own sake, but for the sake of what God wants to accomplish through us."³

This causes holiness, not sin; humility, not pride; worship, not indifference.

2.) He predestined us for adoption.

We should be surprised that something like this could be said about us. By nature, we should not be considered children of God. We were, as the book of Ephesians later says, by nature children of wrath. But God has intervened and made a way for people who were once considered his enemies to become part of his family. The biblical word for

³ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 9.

this idea is adoption.

One thing I absolutely love about this church is that this is a church that loves adoption. We have many families who have brought children into their homes and welcomed them as an equal part of their family. This past summer, one couple from our church John and Elise Dodson adopted a little boy from China name Jonathan.

And when we look at this, I think we can understand why a concept like adoption might go together with a word like predestination. Why? Because adoption is not something that happens by accident. The Dodson's didn't accidentally get on a plane to China and come back with a little boy in their luggage. This adoption involved great planning, a great cost, and a commitment to love a little boy who was born thousands of miles away speaking a language they didn't know.

Did Jonathan do anything to merit or deserve his adoption? No. And neither did we. This love is not rooted in us but in God. Not just according to his will, but his good will, his good "purpose," and good pleasure.⁴

We like Jonathan have been given the accordant rights and privileges that come with this new legal relationship. We belong to a new family.

A love that is from the foundation of the world is a truly everlasting love. A love that has no beginning has no end. This is the only love that is safe and secure.

3.) He redeemed us by the blood.

Redemption is one of those words we don't use like the Bible uses it. In the ancient world, redemption was almost a purely financial term. At a basic level, it means to purchase and transfer ownership.

This calls to mind the Old Testament story of the Exodus. As N.T. Wright says of this paragraph, "Exodus as a hidden story throughout this passage."

Once sold under sin. Enslaved to sin. We were then purchased for freedom. Redemption is a term of deliverance.

Sin and the enemy have no claim over us.

4.) He forgave us with rich and lavish grace.

⁴ εὐδοκία, ας, □ state or condition of being kindly disposed, *good will*. William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, et al., [*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 404.

In high school and in college I studied William Shakespeare's play, Macbeth . It is the story of a man and wife who conspire to kill the king of Scotland and pin the murder onto someone else so that they can become the new king and queen.

They commit the murder. They actually get away with it. But as the play goes on their consciences drive them mad. They know what they have done is wicked, and they can't get over it. Macbeth begins to act in such a paranoid way that he destroys himself and his kingdom.

But the one image of the play that has always stuck with me is that of Lady Macbeth, obsessively washing her hands. Her hands are clean. It's been some time since the murder. But in her mind, her hands are still stained by blood. And no matter how hard she tries to clean her hands, they can never be clean.

Perhaps, you have at one time, or another felt like Lady Macbeth. You had a crushing sense of guilt you have had trouble getting over.

This is something humans do. There is a strong sense of morality in all of human culture. When we sin, we believe there to be a moral debt that needs to be paid, and we don't know what to do when the debt is too big.

The claim of Christianity is that Jesus, out of the riches of his grace, paid a debt on the cross we could have never paid ourselves.

The wisdom of God is displayed by this grace. Only the infinite wisdom of God could find a way to end evil without ending us!

5.) He showed us the mystery of the gospel.

What is the purpose of life?

Apart from God, there is no way we could know. There is no reason we should believe that history has a purpose or that we are more than matter in motion.

God has disclosed himself to us. We can have a relationship with the creator, the cosmic dimensions of the gospel. We are a part of something so much bigger than ourselves. History has a purpose, and we are now a part of it. Our lives and all of reality are filled with more meaning than we could ever imagine.

As John Stott once wrote: *"...history is neither meaningless nor purposeless. It is moving towards a glorious goal."*⁵

Your life has a purpose.

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 41.

6.) He gave us an inheritance.

This language is meant to convey the idea of the Promise Land. And it is absolutely crazy that Paul would be saying this of gentile Christians.

We have a part of the promises to Abraham; the story of Israel is our story now.

No matter what hardship and pain we might face, the end of our story is good.

7.) He sealed us by the Holy Spirit.

We are destined to a future of living with God forever and ever. But until then the Holy Spirit dwells with us, as a reminder that that future is coming. He leads us. He guides us. He comforts and convicts us. He makes us look more like Jesus.

N.T. Wright draws an analogy between the Holy Spirit's relationship with us, and the Pillar of cloud and fire that led the Israel in the wilderness during the times of the Old Testament: *"The spirit is to the Christian and the church what the cloud and fire were in the wilderness: the powerful, personal presence of the living God, holy and not to be taken lightly, leading and guiding the often muddled and rebellious people to their inheritance."*⁶

The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our future; the wedding ring of the promised union with God that awaits all who believe.

This is the goodness of the gospel that Paul cannot get over.

Notice the glorious Trinitarian conspiracy at play. The Father authors our salvation. The Son accomplishes salvation. The Spirit applies salvation.

And if you are in Christ, the infinite wisdom, and power of the Triune God has conspired in grace to love and save you since before time began. There is an infinitely glorious and infinitely good Triune God who has done something so extraordinary that can be the fountain of your hope and purpose and joy.

Notice too; these things are described in the prophetic past tense. Our future is so secure and certain it is as if it already happened.

Application

Worship the Lord; and in this grand vision of who God is, remember who you are. Identity determines behavior. What we do often flows from who we believe we are.

In moments of sin and shame, you will not feel like Ephesians 1 is true of you. *But there is very real difference between what feels true and what is true.*

⁶ Wright, 12–13.

Ephesian 1 is not true of us because of our actions. But it is true of us because of Christ. The phrase “in Christ/in him/in the Beloved” occurs eleven times in verses 1-14. And this phrase is the key to the passage.

You are either in Christ or you are in your shame. Shame will never transform you. Negative self-talk and identity statement are literally an anti-gospel.

Paul is saying who we are in Christ is the truest thing about us; deeper than our sin; more powerful than our shame.

In my counseling office I often challenge people who are dealing with shame read this – read it until you believe it.

Abide in this truth; Abide in Jesus.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:1–5, ESV)

Conclusion

This gospel is capable of changing lives.

Paul himself was once a radicalized Jewish Pharisee, who like a modern-day ISIS member, was bent on hatred and murder. Ken Parker was a white nationalist, who is now a baptized believer.

This gospel is power. It has ramifications for us, our church relationships, and our mission to the world, as we will see in the weeks to come.

Until then, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a people who marvel at the blessings given to us in the gospel. May we worship the God who has saved us and redeemed us. May we root our identity in Christ.

AMEN.

Community Group Discussion Starters

- 1. Read Ephesians 1:1-14. What is the main purpose of these introductory verses? What is this passage asking us to do?*
- 2. Count how many times the phrase "in Christ" or "in him" is used in this passage. What is the significance of this repeated phrase?*
- 3. What does this passage teach us about how a transformed identity transforms our behavior?*
- 4. Ephesians 1:3-14 describes many good things about the good news of Jesus. Which portion of this text connects most with your heart and why?*

Bibliography

A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized. Ed. Michael J. Kruger. Wheaton: Crossway, 2016.

O'Brien, Peter Thomas. *The Letter to the Ephesians.* The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999.

Hughes, R. Kent. *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ.* Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990.

Stott, John R. W. *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians.* The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979.

Wright, Tom. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.* London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004.