

EPISTLE READING FOR JULY 12, 2015

START WITH SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 1:3-14

OBSERVE:

Ephesians has been called “The Queen of the Epistles” because of its lofty themes and profound depths. The passage under consideration is permeated with Trinitarian language, and explores the plans of the Almighty for those who are chosen to be adopted as his children. These plans have been conceived from before time began, and extend to the end of time itself.

Paul — for I believe Ephesians to have been written by Paul in opposition to some contemporary scholars — begins with a kind of doxology to God: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.* This sentence sets the tone for the kind of cosmic scope of this opening passage, and emphasizes the lavish love of God for his creatures for the sake of Christ.

Paul begins to outline the eternal plan of God in verse 4 by describing the eternal nature of God’s strategy: *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.* Paul then explores the plan of salvation, that has been in God’s mind from the beginning: God has ordained that for the sake of his Son, Jesus Christ, and through redemption by his blood those who have been predestined to adoption as sons should receive *the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.*

Paul asserts that God has *made known to us the mystery of his will* — in other words this plan, conceived from the very beginning, has now been disclosed to the apostles.

The ultimate purpose of the plan is not merely salvation in the present time (although it does include that), but it is eschatological. By that I mean it has to do with God’s ultimate plan for the world: *to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.*

Paul returns to the topic of predestination, that is, *that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.* Please note that Paul says *we*, the first person plural.

For immediately following verse 12, the point of view changes: *And you also were included.* He begins to address *you*, second person plural. Who is *we*, and who is *you*? Up until now, has he been speaking of himself and the apostles? the Jews who had accepted Christ as Messiah? And is he now speaking to the Ephesians and other Gentiles who are to be grafted in to the tree (cf. Romans 11:11-25)? I would deduce, based on Ephesians 2:11 that *you* definitely refers to the Ephesians specifically, and Gentiles in particular: *Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth. . .*

Notice how he describes the new relationship of these Gentiles with God: *you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.*

There are three steps necessary for the Gentiles to be included in these promises: hearing the message of truth; believing in Christ; and being marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit.

The whole Trinity is involved in this saving activity of God — the initiation of the Father, the redemptive death and forgiveness of sins through Christ, and the seal and guarantee of the Holy Spirit.

The ultimate purpose of this plan, including all who are adopted as God's children, and who have believed in his gospel, both Jews and Gentiles, is this: *the praise of his glory*.

APPLY:

This single passage would require pages, and books, and volumes to explore adequately. But I will make a stab at lifting up some of the themes that leap out at me.

First, salvation is no afterthought. God the Father has planned for the saving death of God the Son, the seal of assurance through God the Holy Spirit, our adoption as his children, with all the inheritance of the riches of *every spiritual blessing in Christ*. In God's immense and profound love, he has purposed this all along.

This is profound and deeply inspiring. And yet, parts of this passage have always troubled me, namely the emphasis of Ephesians on predestination: *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight*.

I see three at least three questions we have to consider:

1) Does this mean that God has predestined all to salvation, as some popular preachers would suggest? That seems to contradict other parts of scripture that make clear that though all are loved by God, not all choose to love God. And God will not compel them to serve him in heaven, because God loves them too much to coerce their love in return.

2) Or does it mean that God has chosen some for salvation and others, in theological terms, for reprobation? In other words, that God has already chosen some for salvation and some for damnation, and there ain't nothin' anybody can do about it? Again, this seems to contradict scripture. The simplest example of God's original will is John 3:16: *For God so loved the world . . .* And another good example, just for good measure: God is *not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9).

3) Or is Paul using the term predestination in a way that some later theologians have misinterpreted? Here is an insight that others wiser than I may have already figured out. In the first verses of Ephesians 1:3-12, Paul uses the first person plural *we* and *us*, exclusively. And he declares *In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory*.

And then he abruptly changes the perspective to second person plural: *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit*.

What's the difference? Perhaps in the first twelve verses, Paul is speaking of himself and the other apostles, and specifically the Jewish Christians. They are, after all, the *chosen people*. The promises to Israel, according to Romans, have not been revoked: *Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen* (Romans 9:4-5).

To be clear, Paul doesn't necessarily believe that all Israel will be saved: *For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel* (Romans 9:6). And *There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus* (Romans 3:23-24).

But for the purposes of figuring out what Paul means by those predestined, when he says *we* in Ephesians, perhaps he means that the plan of God from the beginning meant that Christ would come first for the Jews, and

then the plan of salvation would be extended to the Gentiles as well: *remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:12-13).*

How have the Gentiles been included in the covenant? *you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.*

He is also very careful to point out that there is no longer Jew or Gentile in Christ — the dividing wall of separation has been knocked down. And he also points out that the Jew and the Gentile come to Christ with the same need and in the same way. Jew and Gentile alike have been dead in their trespasses, and have succumbed to *gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:3-5).*

So, to review, predestination seems to me to preview God's plan of salvation for all who believe, and specifically through the agency of Israel, through Israel's salvation history, to whom were revealed the scriptures, and through whom the Messiah came to the world. But there is still a response required by all when the message of truth is heard and responded to in faith.

RESPOND:

My epiphany concerning this tough theological issue — predestination vs. free will — will certainly not satisfy everybody. But it resolves for me how I can read Ephesians 1 not as an exclusive passage that suggests that only those who are predestined can be saved, but as a promise of hope for all who come to faith in Christ.

This is obviously one of the most controversial issues in Biblical theology. My own answer is this: God has a wonderful plan for all of us. And all who believe in the *message of truth* revealed in Christ Jesus, and sealed through the Holy Spirit, shall be saved.

Lord, I do not presume to understand the depths of the mysteries of your will and your plan. But I rest in the grace that you have revealed in Christ Jesus, and sealed through your Holy Spirit, that I might be saved. Amen.

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<https://soarlectionarybiblestudy.wordpress.com/2015/07/11/epistle-for-july-12-2015/>