

<b>SCRIPTURE FOCUS</b>	<b>Ephesians 1:1-14</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>09.01.19</b>
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<b>LESSON SUMMARY</b>	In Christ, God has richly blessed his people. We are motivated to praise God when we understand the extent of his plan for both us personally and creation as a whole.		

*all scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted*

## ENCOUNTER THE TEXT

### A NOTE ON ELECTION

As you walk through Ephesians 1:1-14, you'll find buzz words that may or may not raise your blood pressure. These include:

- For he **chose** us in him before the foundation of the world... (v4)
- In love he **predestined** us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ... (v5)
- In him we were also **chosen**, having been **predestined** according to the plan... (v11)

The meaning behind *chosen* and *predestined* has been a subject of hot debate among Christians for centuries. The theological term we are dealing with is "election," which refers to God choosing beforehand who will be saved. What everyone agrees on is that some form of election is taking place. To deny election would be to ignore passages like Eph 1 that clearly discuss election. After that basic agreement on the reality of election, folks pretty much fall into one of two camps: Calvinists and Arminians. Calvinists argue for specific election, which means that God chose in advance each individual who would be saved. Arminians argue for general election, which means that God chose in advance to save a group people but not the specific individuals who would be included in that group. At stake are questions of God's sovereignty and human free will, with Calvinists emphasizing the former and Arminians the latter.

An important point to remember in this debate is that there are good Christians on both sides. Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, for example, are both celebrated revivalists who disagreed on the topic (Edwards was a Calvinist, and Wesley was an Arminian). Importantly, their views on the matter were not the linchpin of either's devotion to God or God's use of them. As A.W. Tozer once said,

Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley would not have been caught dead in the same building if they had lived at the same time because one was a strong Calvinist and one was a happy Arminian. But they loved the same Savior, and so their hearts glowed and they blessed their generation and left behind them a stream of spiritual molten gold into which we dip down to this very day.<sup>1</sup>

When we debate election, we need to allow space for folks of different views to love and be used by God.

<sup>1</sup> Tozer, A. W.. Tozer Speaks to Students: Chapel Messages Preached at Wheaton College . Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

For my own part, I see elements of both specific and general election at work in scripture. Jeremiah, for instance, was most definitely elected before birth to play a specific role in God's plan (see Jer 1:5). The people of Israel in general, on the other hand, were elected corporately through God's promise to Abraham. The idea here is that God promised to make a special people from Abraham's descendants, which meant that anyone born into a certain part of Abraham's family tree had been elected to be a part of God's people. In this scheme, Abraham was specifically elected, while his descendants were generally elected, meaning they were born into a status rather than that status being granted to them individually.

When it comes to the NT, I lean toward the idea of general, or corporate election, meaning that God chose to create a special people in Christ. The idea here is that God elected Jesus specifically as the means and ground of salvation, and all who place their faith in Jesus are therefore included in God's family. This thinking is similar to the explanation of Abraham and the people of Israel given above. As to the individuals who end up putting their faith in Jesus, I would argue that God's sovereignty and human freedom are held together in a mysterious tension that can't be explained.

As you can probably tell, I try to play Switzerland in this debate. In the end, we have scripture passages that can support both sides of the argument. The key, as we will see below, is to celebrate *the reason* the NT writers speak of election rather than getting lost in the topic of election itself.

**1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,  
To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:  
2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

As Paul opens Ephesians, he (1) identifies himself as the author, (2) identifies the Ephesians as the recipients, and (3) pronounces a blessing over his audience.

1. As Paul identifies himself as the letter's author, he names himself an apostle of Christ Jesus (the position of highest authority in the early church). In doing so he stresses the unique authority of his words. Underscoring that authority is the source of Paul's apostleship – the very will of God.
2. If you read commentaries on Ephesians, you'll find that several of the earliest copies of the letter that have been found don't include "in Ephesus." This has led some scholars to argue that the letter wasn't written to the Ephesians at all. Instead, it is thought to be a more general letter that left a blank space where the place name should go. This would allow readers to insert the place name as needed. Thus, the letter could be addressed to "God's holy people" "in Ephesus," "in Laodicea," "in Smyrna," and so on. I personally agree with Clinton Arnold, who argues that there is good reason to see Ephesians as having been written to the many house churches in the bustling city of Ephesus.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the issue of the letter's recipients, notice the term Paul used to identify the Christians in Ephesus - "holy ones" (NIV) or "saints" (ESV; NASB). This contrasts with modern usage that understands "saints" as a special class of really good Christians. Sainthood in the NT is a status conferred on *all* Christians!

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<sup>2</sup> Arnold, 23-29. This section in Arnold's commentary offers a great explanation of this issue in general.

3. In pronouncing “grace and peace” over the Ephesian congregations, Paul speaks a blessing of God’s continued care for the community. The Ephesians have already experienced God’s grace at conversion, which brought them peace with both God and one another. The blessing shows that grace and peace are not static experiences in the Christian life. Instead, God’s people can receive new infusions of grace and peace in their lives and congregations.

3 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. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, 9 he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

Vv 3-14 stand as one grand run-on sentence in the original Greek. I have separated vv 3-10 from 11-14 to make things more digestible.

Roughly speaking, vv 3-10 down to the many ways God has worked on behalf of his people. These include:

- He has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing *in Christ*. (v 3)
- He chose us *in Christ* before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless before him. (v 4)
- He predestined us for adoption to sonship *through Christ*. (v 5)
- He has freely given us grace *in Christ* (literally in the one he loves). (v 6)
  - That grace is found in that we have redemption *in Christ* through his blood, which is the same thing as the forgiveness of sins.
- He made known to us the mystery of his will, which he purposed *in Christ*. (v 9)
  - That mystery is that God planned to bring all things in heaven and on earth into unity *in Christ*.

The most striking thing in this passage is the repeated use of in/through Christ language. When we speak of what God has done for his people, we must also speak of Jesus, for it is in and through Jesus that all these things have been accomplished. Regarding this language, I think that it is helpful to think of “in Christ” as referring to a kind of “Jesus space.” Think here of an embassy. Though the embassy is located in a foreign country, it retains the laws and privileges of its home country. That’s why we see those movies and TV shows where people rush to the American embassy – they know that once they cross the embassy boundary line that a new set of rules will apply.

Now think in terms of a “Christ Embassy.” Though we live in a fallen world that stands under God’s judgment, there is one space in this world where different rules apply. That space is found “in Christ,” where God’s blessings – rather than his judgment – rule the day. When we place our faith in Christ, we step over the boundary marker into the Christ Embassy. In this new space, these realities are at play:

- Those in the Christ Embassy have been lavished with God’s grace, meaning particularly that they have been forgiven of sin through Jesus’ work on the cross. (vv 6-9)

- Those in the Christ Embassy have been adopted into God’s family through Christ. (v 5)
- Those in the Christ Embassy have been set aside in Christ to be holy and blameless before God. (v4)
- Those in the Christ Embassy have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm in Christ (v 3).

To be “in Christ,” then, is (1) to be forgiven of wrongdoing and spared judgment, (2) to receive the new status of “child of God” and all of its privileges, (3) to have a new destiny, which is to be holy and blameless before God (this status deals both with forgiveness and personal transformation), and (4) to become the recipient of “every” spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Clinton Arnold helps us understand that piece about “heavenly places” in stating, “Here, however, Paul seems to be using the term more in the sense of “the heavenlies” as a sphere of spiritual blessings to which believers now have access as well as the realm populated by evil spiritual powers. Thus, the term might be best understood as “the spiritual realm.”<sup>3</sup>

Moving now to language of election, it is important to realize that Paul does not want in this passage to spark debate about Calvinism and Arminianism. Instead, he is letting us know that God’s plan in Christ began before creation and that those caught up in this plan are living out a foregone destiny. In other words, if God has chosen and predestined before time itself, nothing can stop him! If this is true, we can trust our lives to God, who will ultimately win out regardless of how things look now.<sup>4</sup>

Moving now to vv 8b-10, we find that God’s purpose in Christ is cosmic in extent – all things will be brought to unity or “summed up” in Jesus. While the extent of God’s plan was previously a mystery, it has now been revealed to his people. Regarding what all things coming to unity in Christ, NT Wright paints a compelling picture: “God intends to flood the whole cosmos, heaven and earth together, with his presence and grace, and when that happens the new world that results, in which Jesus himself will be the central figure, is to be the ‘inheritance’ for which Jesus’ people are longing.”<sup>5</sup>

11 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, 12 in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 13 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, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

English translations differ over how to translate v 11. The NIV has, “In him we were also chosen...,” while the ESV states, “In him we have obtained an inheritance.” The NASB and KJV agree with the ESV. The reason for this discrepancy is that the Greek wording behind “chosen” or “obtained an inheritance” can refer to either allotting an inheritance or obtaining an inheritance. Thus, Paul may be saying that Christians have been chosen or allotted as God’s inheritance in Christ or that Christians have obtained an inheritance in

<sup>3</sup> Arnold, C. E. (2010). [Ephesians](#) (p. 78). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>4</sup> This insight draws from Slater, 42.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, T. (2004). [Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon](#) (p. 12). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Christ. In the end, both translations are linguistically and theologically acceptable. I would personally lean toward the ESV/NASB/KJV take on the verse.

However we wish to translate v 11, the passage as a whole moves from “we” being chosen or obtaining an inheritance to “we” being predestined to “you” being included in Christ. This we-you progression is notoriously hard to interpret. While many argue that “we” refers to Jewish Christians and “you” refers to Gentile Christians (this Jew/Gentile relationship becomes important later in the letter), I think that it is fair to understand Paul as saying he and his evangelistic co-workers accepted Christ temporally before their Ephesian converts. The flow of the passage would then be something like:

- “We” who brought you the gospel obtained an inheritance in Christ
- In order that “we” who brought you the gospel might be for the praise of his glory
- And “you” who believed in Ephesus were also included in Christ when you heard the message
- When “you” in Ephesus believed, you were in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit
- That Holy Spirit is the deposit or down payment of our eventual full inheritance
- You in Ephesus also received that inheritance to the praise of God’s glory

In the end, there is a lot of flexibility in how you take the we-you progression. The points to focus on will be the ideas of inheritance and the Holy Spirit and how these themes intersect. The inheritance, of course, refers to God’s new creation where we will dwell perfectly with him and will be conformed perfectly to the likeness of Christ. The Holy Spirit, Paul says, is a “down payment” of what is to come. This makes sense when we think of the Spirit as God’s presence dwelling within us and also as transforming us to be like Jesus. Amazingly, the heights of our experience with the Holy Spirit in this age (read here “mountain top” experiences and great strides in becoming like Jesus) are merely foretastes of the vast inheritance that is to come. Our present experience, even at its best, can only point us to the fuller hope.

## TEACH THE TEXT

There is a lot going on in Ephesians 1, which means we could easily get lost trying to teach the text. Here’s how I would break things down.

### ELECTION

Rather than waiting for the verbiage of choice and predestination to present themselves in the passage, I would tackle the issue of election before anything else. This will allow the class to address what otherwise might become the elephant in the room. In broaching the subject of election, treat things like a campfire conversation where everyone is allowed to voice their opinions, but no one is favored over anyone else. Feel free to voice your own opinion, too. Just don’t demand that everyone agree with you. In the end, note that God-loving and God-used Christians have fallen on both sides of the debate.

### SAINTS

While I wouldn’t spend much time on the letter’s greeting, I would take a moment to talk about the idea of all Christians being saints. This usage of the term will probably surprise some of your students.

## GOD'S GREAT GOODNESS

Coming to vv 3-14, with election already having been discussed, you'll be able to focus on the true meat of the passage – God's great goodness in Christ. The key here will be to outline all that God has accomplished in/through Christ. If helpful, use the "Christ Embassy" illustration to drive home the "in Christ" language. As this part of the lesson progresses, you'll hit on themes of forgiveness/redemption, blessing, status, destiny, and inheritance.

## MYSTERY

Because the mystery outlined in 8b-10 will come to the fore again in a few chapters, I think it would be wise to note the extent of God's work in Christ. In this part of the lesson, you'll be introducing students to the idea of "new creation" in which all of creation will be redeemed rather than just people going to heaven.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT

While every part of God's goodness deserves careful attention, I would make a special point of the talk of the Holy Spirit and inheritance. For many students, the Spirit is a murky concept, and even those who have a grasp on the who the Spirit is may not have understood him in just this way. When we speak of the Holy Spirit, we ultimately speak of hope, for our experience of the Spirit is just the beginning of what will be.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### Election

1. What do you know about the concept of election?
2. Where do you stand on the matter? How did you come to that point of view?
3. How important is a Christian's view on the doctrine of election for the Christian life?

### Vv 1-2

1. Why do you think Paul names himself as an apostle?
2. What do you think it means that Paul calls all the Christians at Ephesus "saints"?

### Vv 3-10

1. In v 3, Paul calls us to praise God. Why?
2. What has God done for Christians according to vv 3-10?
3. How does the chosen/predestined language function in helping us understand God's goodness?
4. What spiritual blessings have we received in Christ?
5. What does it mean to be adopted in to God's family?
6. Why does Paul keep saying "in Christ"?
7. What is the mystery that has been revealed to us?

## Vv 11-14

1. What is the inheritance that Paul refers to?
2. How is the Holy Spirit attached to that inheritance?
3. What does this tell us about Christian hope?

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