

## GOD'S PLAN IS ETERNAL

Ephesians 1:1-14

The concept of eternity is one of the great doctrines of the Bible. The word “eternal” can have figurative meaning in the sense of something that may have a beginning but does not have an end such as angels or the human soul. The literal meaning would refer to an existence that has no beginning and no ending, such as God. I normally associate the word eternal with the concept of time for contrast or comparison purposes. We think of time as having a past, present and future and this is contrasted with eternity as having none of these.

We have enough trouble getting our heads around this basic concept and then we complicate it further by the idea of “eternity past” and “eternity to come.” Eternity past would be before the beginning of time and the foundation of the world and eternity to come would be after the end of time and passing away of the world. We immediately see the limitation of our finite mind to comprehend an infinite idea. We can conceive of it only as duration indefinitely extended from the present moment in two directions—as to the past and as to the future. Some have tried to explain it as duration without beginning or end; existence, without bounds or dimension; present, without past or future. It is hard to talk or think about it without introducing the concept of “time” as seen in the use of the word “duration.”

I'm going to assume that the “plan” at which we will be looking in the study of Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus is the Plan of Salvation. If we try to apply the literal meaning of “eternal” to the Plan of Salvation, then we would have to conclude that it has no beginning and no ending. However, from the text in the first chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, it appears that the plan had a beginning in “eternity past” (that is, before the foundation of the world) and as we can remember from other studies, there will be no need for faith and no need for salvation when we are fully united with God in heaven. Therefore, we could conclude that the Plan of Salvation will have an end in “eternity to come.”

The key to God's Plan of Salvation is summed up succinctly in the concept of being “in Christ.” Participating in the outcome of the plan is totally a consequence of being in Christ. All the benefits and blessings are a result of our position in Him. As we examine Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, we will see a repetition of this theme in all he teaches. The first chapter is essential to understanding the overall message in this letter to the churches in that region.

### We Are in Christ (1:1-2)

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are at Ephesus and *who are* faithful in Christ Jesus: <sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 1:1-2 (NASB95)

The salutation in a letter from this time in history was designed to answer the questions of who was the writer, to whom was the message directed, and why the message should be heeded. In this particular greeting, we see that Paul was the writer. He had established churches in this region and had spent a considerable amount of time in Ephesus. The additional identifying comments of being an apostle of Christ by the will of God had a twofold purpose. This addition distinguished him from anyone else that might have been named Paul. It also gave credibility to why they should pay attention to the message of the letter. Paul's authority was the result of the sovereign action of God in choosing him to be a messenger to the Gentiles. In today's expression we would say that Paul was “called” to this ministry as opposed to someone who might go into the ministry because it was something their father and grandfather had done and it seemed like a good way to make a living.

Paul was careful in putting labels on the people to whom he was writing. He could have

written something like “Dear Members” or “Dear Friends” and that would have been an accurate description of the readers, but he would have missed a teaching opportunity to get them to realize the responsibility and benefits of who they were. The label Paul used was the word “saints.” As you know, this literally means “holy ones” and was used to describe those who were set apart for a special purpose. If you check most translations, you see what could be interpreted as another group to whom the letter was addressed; namely, “the faithful in Christ Jesus.” The Greek word that is normally translated as the English word “and” can be (and has been) translated as “even” at least 108 times in the KJV. So we see this phrase does not reference a different group but is descriptive of the saints.

Paul describes those he was calling “saints” as those who are faithful in Christ Jesus. The word faithful has two possible meanings. The first meaning we would associate with the idea of those who believe or trust in Christ as related in the gospel message. This meaning comes from the literal interpretation of the Greek root for the word which is “to persuade” or convince or to cause one to believe. The second meaning for the word is closely associated with our concept of obedience which could be expressed as faithfulness. The one word having two meanings reinforces the postulation that “people do behave or conduct themselves in accordance with what they really believe.”

This brings us to the prepositional phrase “in Christ Jesus.” Again, there are at least two interpretations of what Paul is telling us. Both interpretations can be argued to be legitimate. Some of the older Arabic language translations render this as “those who believe in Christ Jesus.” Some of the newer contemporary commentators posit the idea that Paul is referring to those who are “positionally” in Christ. It is likely that the positional argument is the correct nuance since much of what follows in the rest of this chapter is related to our position of being “in Christ.”

The salutation was followed by a benediction or blessing that was common in many of Paul’s letters. The inclusion of “well wishes” was part of the expected etiquette of the times. We might write something like “I trust that all is going well for you and your family.” We have gotten away from reference to the fact that such blessings of “all going well” have their source in God. We would be accused of being sanctimonious if we were that explicit in our letters. We certainly agree that God’s favor (grace) and His peace that comes from being justified through the saving work of Jesus are excellent starting points for considering ourselves to be blessed.

### We Are Blessed (1:3-6)

<sup>3</sup> Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, <sup>4</sup> just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love <sup>5</sup> He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, <sup>6</sup> to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. Ephesians 1:3-6 (NASB95)

We will find that throughout this letter that Paul gave us various descriptions of “who we are” as a result of being the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Associated with these “pictures” that help us understand the implications of God’s plan we will see the action that God has taken, the benefits we receive, the expectations that are incumbent upon us and behaviors that should manifest themselves in our lives and in the life of the church.

Paul begins with a call to eulogize God the Father. You are probably thinking that a eulogy is something done at a funeral. The reason we think in those terms is that we neglect to say good things about a person until it is too late, that is, at their funeral. The word rendered “blessed” is *eulogetos* in the Greek which would be literally translated as “good word.” Of

course, you immediately recognize that this is where the English word “eulogy” comes from. Paul then goes on from there to tell us why we should “say good things about” or praise God.

A general summary statement of why we should praise God is that He has “blessed us” or has spoken or declared good words regarding our status as Christians. Recall (from the Genesis account) that God spoke the worlds into existence. He spoke and it was so. Likewise, God has spoken regarding us (as part of the new creation) and it is so.

What are the good things that God has declared for us? The answer is “All spiritual blessings (good pronouncements) in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” Heavenly places can mean several different things such where we see the stars and clouds, but as used here most likely means “where God dwells.” What is a spiritual blessing? It could be that Paul is making a distinction between temporal and physical blessings and those things that are related to the kingdom of God. Others have said that Paul meant that these were blessings bestowed upon us by the Holy Spirit. We could summarize all this by saying that all the spiritually related good things that could be declared on our behalf from the dwelling place of God are provided for us in Christ Jesus. All these benefits are ours only because we are in Christ.

What are some of these benefits? Verses four and five give us these blessings as being “holy and blameless in His sight (before Him)” and that in His great love we would be “adopted as His sons” through the work that Jesus did. This decision “that all who were in Christ would experience these benefits” was made before the foundation of the world or we could say it is an eternal plan that is outside of the realm or influence of time. (We could get into a discussion regarding the doctrines of election and predestination and argue about whether the predetermination was with regard to who would be included “in Christ” or just accept that all who are included in Christ are destined to experience the spiritual blessings with which God has blessed us in the spiritual realm.)

This begs the question of what our response to such blessedness should be. We see the answer to this in verse six. We should be praising the glory (awesomeness) of His grace which He has freely given us in Christ via the blessings that Paul just described and gave more examples in the following verses.

### We Are Redeemed (1:7-12)

<sup>7</sup> In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace <sup>8</sup> which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him <sup>10</sup> with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, *that is*, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him <sup>11</sup> also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, <sup>12</sup> to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. Ephesians 1:7-12 (NASB95)

The means by which we are brought into this special relationship with God is by the death of Jesus (through His blood) on the cross. In this death, God redeemed us from our slavery to sin and in bringing us into His family we receive as a free gift (grace) the forgiveness of all our sins. God’s purpose in all this is to culminate in the complete fulfillment of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all creation -- “. . . every knee shall bow . . . and every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2:10,11) This is the mystery of His will. We may think, “I knew that -- that not so mysterious.” It is not mysterious to us because God has made it known to us. Before the first advent of Christ, God’s purpose was not clearly understood. Being in the family gives us access to the family treasures of the wisdom and prudence of God. We also learn some of the family secrets of what God is up to in this overall event that we loosely refer to as Creation. This mystery is that God is gathering

everything together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This "all" includes the physical and spiritual worlds. We don't normally think of the physical world as being part of the reconciling act that God is carrying out, but Paul reminds us in Romans 8, that all of Creation groans (as with birth pains) in anticipation of the revelation of the Sons of God at which time, Creation itself will be redeemed.

The concept of redemption implies buying back something that one had owned in a previous time. The price of our redemption is the blood of Jesus. The blood of Christ paid the price of the penalty of our sins and provided forgiveness. Again, Paul stressed the unmerited extravagant generosity of God -- "riches of God's grace that He lavished on us." This was not done on a whim, but was a deliberate and planned process that was based on the perfect wisdom and understanding of God.

God created the worlds by Jesus and the culmination of all things will be that all things will be under the Lordship of Jesus. Jesus is the beginning of all things and the end of all things. He is Alpha and Omega. Another way to put this is that Jesus is the inheritor of all things. Now, because we are also God's children by the new birth and by adoption into His family, then we have also obtained an inheritance along with (in) Christ. The purpose of this is to show the goodness of God so that we might reveal His glory to all beings, physical and spiritual.

Usually when we think about being chosen in Christ, we tend to think about all the benefits to us. There is also a benefit that God derives. The essence of vs. 11 and 12 can be summarized as "We were also chosen so we might be for (to) the praise of His glory." We could say this passage means we should praise God because of His redeeming grace. We should most certainly do that! This passage could also be saying that we (who we are and what we do) are (will be) a "statement of praise" of God's glory. This can be a present reality in that our very lives should bring praise to God and show the world that God's wisdom and God's way are the obvious best choices. It will be a future reality in the Day of Judgment in which God's justice and His mercy will be vindicated before a world that has continued to reject God and rebel against Him.

### We Are Seated (1:13-14)

<sup>13</sup> In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, <sup>14</sup> who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God's own* possession, to the praise of His glory. Ephesians 1:13-14 (NASB95)

The difference in our situation and that of "the world" is that we believed the gospel message of salvation when we heard it. Consequently, we have been included in all that God is doing in Christ. To be sure, we have not seen the full consummation of our purchased redemption; however, God has provided a pledge to us by giving His Holy Spirit. His presence is our guarantee (deposit) of our inheritance (as coheirs with Christ) until that day when the redemption is completed and we see Him face to face. That too will be to the praise of His glory.

The route by which we arrived at this position of being in Christ so that we can share in His inheritance (which is all things) is that we first heard the gospel, we believed and trust in Jesus and then we received the validation of our faith, namely, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This validation is like the seal of a king that certified the authenticity of documents. We also can see God's presence in our lives as a foretaste of what is to come when the final stage of our salvation takes place in heaven.

God's plan seems very clear and the character and nature of God are evident in the person of Jesus. It doesn't get any clearer than that. This gospel is God's final word to mankind about Himself. We will not receive any clearer revelation.