

06–05–2020 Prison Letters: Ephesians 1:3–14 Bible Study

Reread Ephesians 1:3–14 in your favorite translation. I will reprint the NET–2 translation.

3 Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ. 4 For he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him in love. 5 He did this by predestining us to adoption as his legal heirs through Jesus Christ, according to the pleasure of his will— 6 to the praise of the glory of his grace that he has freely bestowed on us in his dearly loved Son. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our offenses, according to the riches of his grace 8 that he lavished on us in all wisdom and insight. 9 He did this when he revealed to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, 10 toward the administration of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ—the things in heaven and the things on earth. 11 In Christ we too have been claimed as God’s own possession, since we were predestined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will 12 so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, would be to the praise of his glory. 13 And when you heard the word of truth (the gospel of your salvation)—when you believed in Christ—you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the down payment of our inheritance, until the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of his glory.

COMMENTS:

Remember that this whole section is one sentence in Greek. Paul is so enthused about what he sees God has done and promised to do for his children in the future that he just kept running on without stopping to breath.

Some commentators have noticed that the work of God the Father is chiefly described in verses 3–6, the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in verses 7–10, and the work of the Holy Spirit in verses 11–14. They have divided the paragraph along Trinitarian lines.

John Stott provides a temporal outline—the past blessing of election (vv. 4–6), the present blessing of adoption (vv. 5–8), and the future blessing of unification (vv. 9–10)—followed by a section on the “scope” of these blessings.

E. K. Simpson lists the blessings: election, adoption, redemption, forgiveness of sins, wisdom and understanding, the unification of things in Christ, and the seal of the Holy Spirit.

In his very extensive commentary, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones abandons any attempt to provide a neat outline and simply goes through the section significant word or phrase by significant word or phrase.

I find each of these choices has something to commend it but I find the Trinitarian framework is the most helpful. Paul is saying that the blessings listed come from God the Father, become ours in Jesus Christ, and are applied by the Holy Spirit.

We notice, for example, that God the Father is the subject of nearly every verb in the section, and that the phrase “in Christ” or “in him” occurs throughout. We will now go through these verses examining the general thoughts and phrases.

The first word in this long sentence is a Greek word which means to speak well or kindly about someone. It can be expressed as “thanks be,” “blessed be,” or “praise be.” In the NT, the word is used exclusively for God since he alone is worthy to be blessed.

He is blessed because he is the author of all the blessings that he bestows upon the believer in Christ. Since such forms of blessings were common among the Jews, this passage may have a Jewish antecedent.

In the OT, the Hebrew word most translated bless, focuses not so much on what is received, but on the relationship between the giver and the recipient of the blessing. Its usage is almost equally divided between God blessing people, people blessing one another and people blessing God.

God is blessed and he is the Father of Jesus who is the Christ (promised Messiah). This God has also blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

The final section of this verse consists of a series of three prepositional phrases clarifying the nature of God's blessings. First, God has blessed us "in Christ." That is, these blessings are reserved specifically for those who believe in Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension and are united with him through faith.

It could be argued that "in Christ" is the most important phrase of this passage (and the entire letter), as it occurs in different forms with the preposition "in" eleven times (Eph. 1:3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10 [2x], 11, 12, 13 [2x]). Second, God has blessed us "with every spiritual blessing."

Here Paul limits the type of blessing specifically to spiritual blessings (i.e., blessings pertaining to life in the Spirit). This phrase is a summary of everything Christians receive through God's work in his Son, including election, adoption, redemption, forgiveness, and the gift of the Spirit.

Third, God has blessed us "in the heavenly places" (lit., "in the heavenlies"), a phrase found only in Ephesians (1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12). Because our blessings are "in Christ," they are also in the heavenly places, where Christ is now ruling. And yet, the benefits Christ secured are available to his children here and now (though not fully). This verse serves as a summary statement for the entire section.

Paul provides the first of four main reasons believers are to praise God: because he chose us. God's election is a theme throughout the Bible (Gen. 12:1-3; Deut. 7:6-8; 14:2). In Christ, God chooses a people for himself.

This election is said to take place "before the foundation of the world" (cf. John 17:24; 1 Pet. 1:20). That is, God's choice in election occurred before time and creation, emphasizing that this choice was based on God's purpose, not human merits. The appropriate response is to praise God for such blessing.

Paul continues by saying that the purpose of those chosen by God is "that we should be holy and blameless before him" (cf. 1st John 1:8-10). We were children of God because he made us. Then by our disobedience we sold ourselves into the slavery of sin.

Now we are restored to God's family by adoption. The child doesn't choose the parent, the parent chooses the child and makes that child an heir of all he owns. This all happens because of the pleasure of God's will, not our will.

The last phrase, "in love," could modify either the previous statement ("that we should be holy and blameless before him in love") or what follows ("in love he predestined us").

Although some English versions favor the former (CSB, KJV, NKJV, NRSV), the latter interpretation is preferable (ESV, NASB, NIV) since the focus of this section is on God's work of blessing his people.

God's gracious act of predestination and adoption was done so that his redeemed children might praise his glorious grace (v. 6; cf. vv. 12, 14). God's grace is glorious as it reflects his character and is therefore worthy of our highest praise. Paul further notes that God has "blessed" us with this grace.

This verb highlights the abundant kindness of God in freely granting salvation to those who did not deserve it. This grace comes to us "in the Beloved," that is, "in Christ."

In vs. 7-8 Paul now offers the second of four main reasons why God is worthy of the praises of his people: because he redeems us. Paul moves from God's predetermining choice before time to his work of redemption in the course of history.

This verse is structurally parallel to verses 11 and 13, as each begins with "In him." The redemption believers have is "in him," that is, "in the Beloved" (v. 6). The Greek word translated "redemption" indicates release or liberation from imprisonment or captivity.

It occurs 10 times in the NT, seven of those times in Paul's writings (cf. Rom. 3:24; 8:23; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:14; 4:30; Col. 1:4; cf. also Heb. 9:15; 11:35). The concept of redemption is found also in the OT, where it describes both the release of slaves from bondage (Ex. 21:8; Lev. 25:48) and the deliverance of God's people from slavery in Egypt (Deut. 7:8; 9:26; 13:5).

In verse 7 Paul specifically indicates that our redemption in Christ is "through his blood"; the means by which redemption is procured is the sacrificial death of Jesus. The redemption believers receive is then equated with "the forgiveness of our trespasses." Forgiveness implies an offense requiring just punishment.

Here, Paul uses "trespasses" instead of the more common word "sins," though the parallel passage in Colossians 1:14 uses "sins." The believer's redemption is presented as the fulfillment of a "new exodus" prophesied in the OT. In other words, the redemption Christians receive is the fulfillment of what was typified when Israel was redeemed from Egypt

And just as Israel's exodus from Egypt was accompanied by the institution of the Levitical system so that Israel could atone for their sins, so also the believer's redemption in Christ from sin is accompanied by full and final forgiveness.

Behind God's work of redemption is his grace ("according to the riches of his grace"; Eph. 1:7). In verse 6 Paul spoke of God's "glorious grace," and now he picks up the topic of grace once more, this time referring to the wealth or abundance of God's grace (cf. 1:18; 3:8, 16; cf. Col. 1:27; 2:2-3).

Ephesians 1:8 expands upon the "grace" mentioned in verse 7 by indicating that God has "lavished" this grace upon his people, further elaborating the extent of God's grace. Paul then adds that the manner in which God bestows his grace is "in all wisdom and insight." God did not lavish his grace on his people in an ill-conceived or haphazard manner.

The plan of God to accomplish redemption through his Son is no longer a mystery. It was God's design all along for his people to understand his purposes, but some of the details of his plan were not disclosed.

In the gospel, however, God has revealed his divine mystery, which involves uniting all things in Christ. Verse 9 is best understood as stating the means by which God made his purposes known ("by making known to us"). "Making known" is often used in connection with God's unveiling of his revelation (Rom. 16:26; Eph. 3:3, 5, 10; Col. 1:27).

"Mystery" in Paul's writings refers to something once hidden but now disclosed, especially as it relates to God's plan to unite all things (including Jews and Gentiles) into the one body of Christ (Rom. 11:25; 16:25-27; Eph. 3:3, 4, 9; Col. 1:26-27; 1 Tim. 3:16).

The term occurs twenty-eight times in the NT, twenty-one of those times in Paul's writings, including six times in Ephesians (1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19). Just as God's choice to predestine believers for adoption was "according to the purpose of his will" (1:5), so, too, his design to reveal his redemptive plan is "according to his purpose."

Specifically, God's plan was set forth in his Son. That is, Christ was intimately involved with the Father in planning redemption. In v. 10 God set forth his plan not only "in Christ" but also "as a plan for the fullness of time," communicating his divine purpose.

The term translated "plan" occurs eight other times in the NT (Luke 16:2, 3, 4; 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4) and can have three different meanings: (1) the act of administering; (2) that which is administered (i.e., a plan); or (3) the office (or role) of an administrator.

God's perfect plan was "to unite all things" through his Son. This phrase describes the content of the mystery hidden in the past but now revealed in the gospel. The only other NT use of the verb "to unite" is in Romans 13:9, where Paul notes that all of the OT commandments can be "summed up" by the command to love your neighbor as yourself.

"All things" refers to the entire universe (cf. Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16, 20). This is confirmed when Paul amplifies this thought by adding, "things in heaven and things on earth." Finally, all of God's purposes will be accomplished "in him," that is, "in Christ."

Christ is not only the means by which God will unite all the disparate elements of creation; he is also the center and focal point through whom and for whom this will take place. The election and predestination of Israel as God's firstborn son pointed forward to Christ, the elect one, God's Son, just as the redemption of Israel from Egypt pointed forward to his cross.

In verses 11-12, Paul provides the third of four reasons believers should praise God: because he has given us an imperishable inheritance. The repetition of "In him" (i.e., Christ) indicates that this section of the eulogy is structurally parallel to verses 7 and 13.

It is through our union with Christ that believers are incorporated into the family of God and have become heirs to the blessings and promises made by the Father (cf. Rom. 8:17; Gal. 3:29; 4:1, 5, 7).

The verb translated “we have obtained an inheritance” can also mean to “appoint by lot” and occurs only here in the NT. In light of the latter definition, some interpret the phrase to mean, “we have been allotted to God as his inheritance” or “we were claimed by God as his portion.”

While the concept of God’s possessing his people as an inheritance is found in the OT (e.g., Deut. 4:20; 9:29; 32:8-9; 1 Kings 8:51; Pss. 33:12; 106:40), it does not fit the tenor of the context of Ephesians 1:11-12, which emphasizes the blessing (i.e., inheritance) believers receive. The theme of believers receiving an inheritance is mentioned also in verses 5, 14, and 18.

Paul further assures the Ephesian believers of their inheritance (which is both present and future) by reminding them again that God has predestined them to possess it. Just as believers were predestined for adoption “according to the purpose of his will” (1:5), so here they are predestined to receive an inheritance.

This happens, “according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.” The comfort to believers is that, while we were sinners and his enemies (Rom. 5:8-10), God delighted to choose a people for himself. That salvation is God’s initiative is nothing but good news.

This was not a reckless and ill-conceived plan but was done according to his purpose (cf. Eph. 3:11), counsel, and will. It was a carefully considered plan carried out by his sovereign control of the universe.

In v. 12 we see the divine purpose for why believers are predestined to receive an inheritance: that they might be to the praise of his glory (cf. vv. 6, 14). Paul further describes the “we” who are chosen for the purpose of praising God’s glory by adding “who were the first to hope in Christ.”

God’s glory is the revelation and manifestation of who he is: his essence, power, majesty, purity, and holiness. Therefore, to praise God for his glory is to declare that he is the one true God, who made heaven and earth.

Paul now highlights the final reason why God is worthy of the praises of his people: he has sealed them with his Holy Spirit. The repetition of “In him” indicates that this section is structurally parallel to verses 7 and 11.

The main thrust of verses 13-14 is, “You were sealed with the Holy Spirit.” Paul again reminds his readers to bless God because of the gift of the Holy Spirit, who not only indwells his people but also is the means by which they are sealed so as to guarantee that they will receive their promised inheritance.

The Holy Spirit is described as “promised.” The Spirit was promised to the people of Israel in the OT (Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26-27; 37:14; Joel 2:28-29; cf. Acts 1:4; 2:33; Gal. 3:14) and is the means (“with”) by which God seals his people.

Paul also indicates that their sealing with the Spirit took place “when [they] heard the word of truth.” In contrast to the many false gospels, Paul speaks of the word he preached as being “the word of truth” (cf. Gal. 2:5, 14; Col. 1:5). He further describes his message as “the gospel of your salvation.”

That is, it is the good news that saves one from the impending wrath of God (cf. Rom. 1:18).

The result of hearing and believing was that the Ephesian Christians “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.” When they heard the gospel and believed it, they were immediately sealed with the Holy Spirit.

“Sealed” is the main verb in this section (Eph. 1:13-14) and is a divine passive (passive voice with the implied subject being God; i.e., they were sealed by God). This verb can be used to convey at least four ideas: (1) security; (2) authentication; (3) genuineness; and (4) identification of ownership (cf. 4:30; 2 Cor. 1:22).

The last option seems most appropriate in this context: God is to be blessed because he seals believers with his Spirit, claiming them as his own and securing their eschatological inheritance. Paul further elaborates on the person of the Holy Spirit by reminding his readers that the Spirit “is the guarantee of our inheritance.”

“Guarantee” is used only three times in the NT, each by Paul in reference to the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; cf. Rom. 8:23). In the ancient world, a “guarantee” functioned as a down payment given to someone providing a service with the expectation that full payment would be made after the service was performed.

Once the guarantee was accepted, a person was committed to fulfilling the terms of the contract. Similarly, God has given his people the Holy Spirit with the expectation and assurance that a full inheritance will follow (cf. 2 Cor. 5:5). That is, the presence of God’s Spirit will not be undone but will endure “until we acquire possession of it” (Eph. 1:14; cf. 4:30).

Although the inheritance believers will receive certainly includes the blessing of eternal fellowship with God, because the Spirit indwells believers they can even now begin to enjoy their inheritance.

Again, the result of God’s favor on his people that includes sealing with the Holy Spirit should lead to praise: “to the praise of his glory” (cf. 1:6, 12). This final expression of praise concludes not only the fourth and final section but also the entire eulogy as a whole (vv. 3-14). Thus the eulogy not only began with blessing and praise; it ends in the same way.

REFLECTION QUESTION: My simple question is this: Why would God do such wonderful things for a sinner such as I? God’s grace is great beyond anything we could imagine.
(It’s hard to believe that this is all about one sentence)