

God Picked You!

Fall Quarter: God's Exceptional Choice

Unit 3: We are God's Artwork

Lesson 10

Sunday School Lesson for the week of November 6, 2022

By Craig Rikard

Lesson Scripture: Acts 19; Ephesians 1:1-14, Revelation 2:1-7

Key Text: *Praise be to God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Eph. 1:3*

Authors note: All lesson intended to serve as a supplement to the Teacher's Book. Traditional pronouns are used; however, God transcends gender and language.

Introduction

Christianity was initially understood to be a small Jewish sect. However, after the call of Paul, the faith spread into the Greek and Gentile world. At the time of Paul's death, Christianity was moving toward Europe.

Paul was reared in a Jewish home residing in a Greek city, Taurus. A devout Pharisee, Paul was known for persecuting Christians. However, the book of Acts seems to indicate that the stoning of Stephen, and especially Stephen's words prior to his death, greatly unsettled Paul. Stephen's death is followed by Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road. He was known for hunting down Christians in the beginning; after Damascus he was known for hunting down souls for Christ.

The words God spoke to Paul after his conversion are revealing. God told Ananias in Acts 9 to go to Paul, for "I will show him how much he must suffer in my name." In our human nature, we would think that promising Paul blessing upon blessing would lead him to embrace his call. However, Paul is told from the beginning that he will suffer. The call of Paul was so personal and real that Paul did not question the adversity awaiting. Of course, Paul was blessed and lived a spiritually wealthy life; yet, he was shipwrecked and thrown in jail on several occasions. Even so, Paul's faith did not waver, nor could any act of suffering deter him from fulfilling his call.

Our text is taken from the salutation of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It is believed Paul wrote this letter while imprisoned in Rome the first time. One of the great attributes in Paul's life was his hope. Hope isn't simply "wishing" things will turn out well. Hope to Paul meant that Christ was present in every moment of his life, wasting not one second of it, and leading him toward a day of eternal glory. Thus, Paul could write in 2 Corinthians 4: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed, perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." Paul is imprisoned in Rome but filled with hope.

When we read the letters of Paul, we often fail to consider Paul's personal growth in the faith. Paul was not a completed product when God called him. There was much for Paul to see, experience, and understand. Therefore, the earlier letters of Paul are different from the later letters. The letter to the Ephesians is most certainly written near the end of Paul's life. It is filled with spirituality and a greater understanding of the will of God as it was revealed in Jesus Christ.

As Paul ministered in the Greek world, he was growing in his faith. God's truth has always been revealed in a myriad of ways in the world. The Greeks may initially not have believed in Christ. However, they did possess an understanding of the human spirit. Whereas the Jews believed the body and spirit are inseparable, the Greeks believed the body to be a "prison of the soul." Thus, at death, the soul enters into an enlightened state. In Judaism, the soul and body are one, and in Jewish Christianity, the body and spirit are resurrected. As Paul ministered in the Greek world, he recognizes those nuggets of truth God has revealed in the Greek world. Thus, his understanding of death and resurrection is slightly broadened. You will notice today that our understanding of death and resurrection is far more Greek than Jewish. We believe the spirit of that person is with God, and, still, there will come a day of resurrection.

The above paragraphs are written only to help us understand that Paul was in a constant state of growth. By the time Paul wrote Ephesians he had experienced a myriad of events that informed and illuminated his faith. Consequently, you will notice that Ephesians appears to possess far more spirituality than 1 Thessalonians, one of Paul's first letters. The initial letters of Paul addressed specific church problems. Ephesians, on the other hand, seems to be a reminder of what God has done through Christ and a celebration of the wonder and power of our faith.

The Epistle

As stated above, the Ephesian letter addresses no specific church problem. It is a letter that would bless all churches. Thus, it is one of the "circular" letters that was passed from church to church. This letter would prove very important to the developing Christian Church growing throughout Asia Minor.

Our text consists of the letter's salutation. Paul wrote letters much like we do today. There was the opening greeting, the body, and the conclusion. The salutation was never intended to become "church doctrine." The salutation is much akin to our writing, "I hope you are doing well and in good health." I listened to a sermon on television while traveling. The preacher chose Paul's salutation as his text. It read, "I pray you prosper and are in good health." From these words of greeting, the pastor began preaching that God wants everyone to be financially prosperous and to avoid illness. I could appreciate his reverence for the Word. However, he had taken the text out of context and attempted to create a doctrinal premise that the Gospel did not support.

Certainly, we mean what we write; but the intent of our letter is not found in the salutation. If my daughter wrote me a letter she would most likely write, "I hope you and Mom are well. I miss you very much." From there she might write, "I have run into a lot of expenses I had not expected." At this point she has moved into the body, the main reason she is writing. She needed money! Most of Paul's letters are written in a similar fashion. There is an affirming salutation prior to Paul moving into the body of the letter.

We can note that the salutation in the letter to the Ephesians is rather unique. The opening flows into the body and is filled with expressions of spirituality that are enlightening. Beginning with verse 4 Paul continues his salutation and begins to offer an understanding of why his readers are so blessed.

Paul Writes in Immeasurable Joy and Confidence

Before examining Paul's words in verse 4 and forward, I want to express the overall feeling I have, as do many, when reading the opening to Ephesians. One of the beautiful attributes of Paul was his "inexpressible joy." He almost reminds us of a person so happy they can't stop talking. He moves from one expression of joy and gratitude to another. There never seems to be enough words. The opening to Ephesians contains the longest sentence in the New Testament. Verse 14 is a little over 200 words long! In 2 Corinthians 9:15 Paul was similarly enraptured and overjoyed over what God has done. He wrote, "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift." The phrase "inexpressible gift" implies there are not enough words to capture the deep sense of joy Paul feels.

The best expression I can write as I read Paul's salutation is that Paul's words are "baptized in joy." The joy, gratitude, and hope of Paul seem to breathe through his choice of words. Our first adopted daughter arrived six months earlier than expected. I was overwhelmed by the news, and I was so happy I felt my heart would burst. I called Gail at work and immediately said, "We have a baby girl! We are to pick her up in the morning!" Gail responded in an equally excited tone, "How old is she?" I answered, "Two weeks!" She then asked non-stop questions, "How much does she weigh; how long was she?" I couldn't answer. I was so excited I failed to ask. Gail wanted to know so we could quickly buy clothes, formula, a crib, etc. Those first days were the most excited of our married life. We called everyone we knew and started most conversations with, "Guess what?" We were baptized in joy, indescribable joy. To this day I am truly at a loss of words to describe our joy and gratitude in those days.

Paul felt such joy in expressing how God had blessed us in Jesus Christ. He uses every word available and moves from one thought to another. I can imagine how the churches must have felt reading this letter from Paul. Times were tense and at times dangerous. Their apostle, Paul, proclaims, from jail an excited hope, an unwavering faith, and inexpressible joy to those Christians who possibly faced an uncertain future. Paul, overall, seems to joyfully proclaim to them: "Look what God has done for us in Christ!" "Consider how blessed we are!" "This is the Christ who is with us now, and always!"

Have you experienced a moment of joy - or moments of joy - that left you speechless? How did you share this moment with others in your life? As you recall your initial experience of choosing Christ and uniting with His Church, can you share how you felt?

We Are the Chosen: The Overjoyed, Blessed People of God

In the opening of the Ephesian letter Paul introduces himself as the author, reminding them he is an apostle by the will of God. If left to human factors alone, Paul most likely would never serve

as an apostle. He had made the early Christians objects of scorn and ridicule. He actually believed the faster those who followed Jesus could be eradicated the better. He ordered their stoning and death. However, during the stoning of Stephen a voice must have spoken in his conscience, and it disturbed him. Consequently, his heart was fertile for that converting, transforming moment on the Damascus Road.

Can you identify a moment in your journey of faith that opened your heart to Christ? If so, in what way do you think it was related to your surrendering to Christ?

We can only image the disbelief of some early Christians when they heard Paul was a Christian. Ananias must have been uneasy when God called him to approach Paul. If left solely to their humanity, the Christian community would have run in the opposite direction from Paul. However, the will of God was at work. Historically, God has chosen the most unlikely people to become his instruments of redemption. He chose the weak nation of Israel, captives in Egypt, to proclaim to the nations there is one God only. He chose a babe placed in an ark on the Nile to later receive the decalogue. He chose judges like Deborah, a woman, to deliver Israel. He chose Gideon, the least of a small tribe, to lead his people against Midian. He chose a peasant girl and a working-class young man to bring the Messiah into the world. Jesus chose 12 regular men with feet of clay to found the future church. And, now, to proclaim the redeeming Gospel to the entire world God chose, of all people, Paul.

All of us are chosen by God to embody Jesus and to become the living expression of Jesus in the world. The Church is indeed the “body of Christ” in the world. We too quickly disqualify ourselves. We should never quickly dismiss others as unqualified to serve God and should not disqualify ourselves. The Church is chosen, and thus members of the Church are chosen! We may not be called to preach or to evangelize the entire world. However, we are called to share Jesus in our own personal world. We are called to minister to those in our path. This calling is no less important than that of a clergyperson. Our calls to serve God are simply different.

When Paul writes that God has blessed us in the heavenly realm with all spiritual blessings, he is reminding the early church that our call did not originate within ourselves or the world about us. Our calling is from God. We are blessed with blessing from the realm of God, from the eternal realm of God. Thus, we are called to a “high calling” (Philippians 3).

Was there a time when you felt disqualified to serve the Lord? What were those things you thought disqualified you? Was there a moment when you realized God had a purpose for your life? How have you lived out that purpose in the life of the Church? In your daily walk?

Our Calling is of Eternal Origin

Paul excitedly shares that we were called before the foundation of the world. Paul, through faith, accepts the great mysteries of God, and, at times, never attempts to explain. What does he mean “before the foundation of the world”? For Paul, it meant that our calling did not originate in us but has always existed in the mind and will of God the Creator. Paul is not attempting to confuse his readers. He wants us to understand the wonder and magnificence of our calling. Paul wants

his readers to understand that our calling is so important and beautiful that they had to come from the mind and will of the Creator.

It is important to read Paul's full statement in verse 4. Many read half the sentence and begin to question. After all, it would read, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world." Consequently, many begin to question, "Did God choose us and not others?" Their emphasis is on "us." Yet, let us read the complete sentence: "In him before the creation TO BE HOLY AND BLAMELESS IN HIS SIGHT." It wasn't individuals that God chose while neglecting others. What God chose and predestined was the redemption of the world. God chose before the creation of the world that His children would live blameless and holy lives. The emphasis is upon the end result: that his people "be blameless in his sight." It is the "end state of being" that has been determined. When human history ends and the new heaven and earth are established all will live blameless and holy. This end has never been altered or diminished. It was God's will in the beginning, in the present, and in the future to redeem and transform the world. This calling does not negate our free will. The end, towards which God desires we move, is God's predetermined holiness. Through faith, by free will, we choose to participate in God's grace in Christ and engage in a disciplined life of prayer, service, and love. As we participate in God's grace, we move toward that ultimate state of being: to be blameless and holy.

It is also important to understand that it isn't the individual that has been chosen and predetermined; it is the Church and the Church's mission! Thus, Paul uses the plural "us" when speaking of predetermination. From the beginning God has determined that his Church live out its calling to be holy in the world. We are to live a life that sets us apart in order to draw the world to Christ.

Moving into verse 5, Paul once again mentions "predestination." Again, who or what is predetermined? God predetermined that those who choose to believe and trust in Christ should be counted as sons and daughters of God. It is through Jesus Christ that we intimately enter the family of God and enter into God's redemptive history. From the beginning, especially after the fall in Genesis, God has been moving in human history, moving everything and everyone toward the final coming of the Kingdom. God's moving in our history does not mean "causing us to believe or causing us to act." God has revealed the divine will of righteousness and love throughout our history. In Christ that divine will was clearly visible. Jesus was blameless, righteous, holy, and loving. In God's perfect time Jesus joined human history and calls us to join Him as that history moves toward that day of perfection.

Has Paul's mention of predetermination puzzled you in the past? What was it that puzzled you most? What do you think of the difference between the individual being chosen before the creation of the world and the Church being chosen?

The use of the phrase "adoption to sonship" specifically addresses Paul's Gentile audience. The Jewish people understood themselves as God chosen people, and only them. However, the will of God did not emphasize the choosing of one nation over another. God chose Israel to be an instrument of his redemptive will. The proclamation of God's light, truth, and love had to involve an initial people. That nation was Israel. As a nation, they were to bring the good news of God's redemption to the world. When Paul writes that the Gentiles were adopted to sonship,

he joyfully informs the Gentiles that they have been adopted into the family of God, the Church. They have been grafted into God's redemptive history, first revealed to the Jewish people. Adoption implies being brought into an already existing family. Through Christ, it was time to enlarge the family.

I proudly and joyfully adopted two daughters. Speaking for most adoptive parents, when the child is placed in your arms the term "adopted" means nothing. They were my daughters. I never even think about them adopted. I could not love a biological child any more than I do my girls.

When Paul used the term "adoption" he was in no way implying the Gentiles are "less than" the Jewish nation. The word is only used to help the Gentiles - and Jews - understand that God has taken others into the family and ultimately desires that entire world to be brought into the family. God loves all, equally. There are no original children and adopted children in the Kingdom of God. We are all children. Period.

What does it mean to you to know you have been adopted into the family of God? Do you believe the Church has a clear understanding and mission to bring all, from every station, background, and nation, into the family of God? If not, why not? What can we do better as the Church to emphasize God's desire for one family and to live in loving unity?

The gift of Jesus Christ was an act of God's pleasure and will. When we attempt to understand "why" God has given us such a gift we can accurately say, "Because God loves us." God did not have to create us and certainly could have forsaken us. However, God is love. And what God has done emerges from His divine pleasure. God wanted to create us, wanted to bless us, wanted to redeem us, and wants to bring all into the divine Kingdom where holiness and love reign. I once bought a person's lunch, and they asked me, "Why did you do that?" I answered, "Because I wanted to." I wanted them to know I cared about them, and the lunch was a small expression of my love. However, I did so because "I wanted to do it." Why did I want to? At this point I am without words and understanding. There is a life within us that desires to care and love without need of reason. I truly believe such actions are rooted in what it means to be made in the image of God. God is loving and good. From the very nature of God emerges acts of love and kindness. Thus, we might ask, "Why did God bring the Gentiles into the family?" My best answer is, "Because God desired it." And he desired it because the Lord loves us. At this point, I am at a loss of words. After all, I am speaking of an "inexpressible gift."

Have you even engaged in a "why, why, why" discussion with a child? Have you ever reached a point when you admit you really don't know why you care so much? What do you think it means to know God has created you, redeemed you, and called you "out of His good pleasure"? Do you believe there is a point in which human language fails us in attempting to understand eternal reality?

When I teach Bible courses, I often begin by asking the students to close their eyes. I then would ask, "When you see nothing raise your hand." After a few moments hands would rise. I would then ask, "What did nothing look like." Almost all said, "Black empty space." I then would respond, "But black is something. It is a color. Emptiness is a state of being. Space too is something." The point of this lesson was to remind them that our brains can only go so far and

understand only so much. Thus, there is always mystery in life. In attempting to define God's good pleasure I feel as though my mind is attempting to describe mystery. All I can do is accept the mystery by faith. Jesus has revealed that God is love and desires the redemption of all. Therefore, I can trust the mystery.

Is there a sense of mystery in your faith? Can you express what you mean by the mystery? Have you ever stepped out in faith without knowing all the answers? In other words, have you ever asked all the questions to gain all the understanding possible before making a decision? Did you make the decision anyway? Why? How do you think faith and mystery are related?

All through Christ

Paul is determined that the Church understand God's will involves the gift of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the revelation of God's will to us. Furthermore, Jesus is the expression and revelation of God's good pleasure toward us. Prior to Jesus, God's redemptive will remained a mystery. The Old Testament contains those moments when God's light would break into human history, revealing His nature and His desire for His people. The gift of Jesus is the ultimate breakthrough of God's will into human history. The gift of Jesus served not only to redeem those in His path but also to create God's holy Church. The Church then becomes the "body of Christ." We become the revelation in the world that God loves the world. We become the face, hands, and feet of Jesus in the world. The Church is far more than a mere expression of God's redemptive will. We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower us as we bring Christ to the world. We then are vessels used by the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus to all.

Do you understand that the Church is truly the presence of Jesus in the world? As a member of the Church, do you realize that you can become the presence of Jesus to another? Do you believe your church possesses a clear understanding that they are the "body of Christ." If not, what do you think can be done to help your church understand their special calling in the world?

Our ministry continues until the ultimate Day of the Lord. There is coming a day when Christ returns and establishes in all its fullness the Kingdom of God. In the Old Testament, they saw expressions of God's kingdom in their world. In Jesus, the Kingdom of God was embodied. We could witness the Kingdom of God in the world, touching the untouchable, loving those the world rejected, and redeeming those neglected. In the crucifixion of Jesus, we witnessed the Kingdom of God as sacrificial love for the world. Through the resurrection of Christ, we witnessed the eternal nature of God's kingdom. It is unstoppable. Not even death can conquer God's eternal life. The Kingdom of God is eternal truth, light, and love. This is the Kingdom embodied in the Church and its mission. One day, all the attributes of the Kingdom will come to fruition and culmination. The world will live under the reign of our loving God. In the Kingdom all will live in unity under the Lordship of Christ, and we will live in unity with all of creation.

Do you have an understanding of the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God? What do you think is meant by the statement: "The Kingdom of God is moving in the world now?" Where have you witnessed the reality of the Kingdom of God?

Paul was overwhelmed over what he knew to be true in Jesus. He was sustained, nurtured, and empowered through the living Gospel. In a few short verses, while in prison, Paul attempts to remind the Church of who it is that loves her and the eternal purpose to which she's been called.

We Have Joined God's Redemptive History in Christ

All of us are the sons and daughters of God. Like the early Christians, we have been grafted into the divine purposes of God. Thus, our lives have purpose and meaning. As those who are instruments of God's redemption, and God's dear possession, we can live in hope. As Paul wrote in Romans 8, "All things work to the good for those who love God, and are called according to his purposes." Remember, hope is the confidence we have that we are never alone, that every moment of our life is used of God for His high and noble purposes, and that all events and experiences in our lives are leading us into that day in which God's goodness reigns. Even those moments that lead us to feel as if God is absent are being brought into conformity with God's will. God is using them all! There is no greater, more serene life than one anchored in this hope.

In the past, what has been your understanding of hope? Did you use the phrase "I hope" to mean "I wish"? What is the difference between Christian hope and wishing things will all work out? Do you understand how hope gives one the gift of serenity? Can you share a moment in your life when Christian hope sustained you through a difficult time?

The Seal

I've loved performing weddings through the years. It is a special moment to hear their vows to God and to each other. Then there is that crowning moment when the rings are slipped upon their fingers. The rings are the "seals" of their marriage. The rings proclaim to the world that they live in a holy covenant with one they deeply love.

Paul writes, "We have been given the seal of the Holy Spirit." The Spirit within us lives through us and reveals to the world that we live in a holy covenant with our Creator. We belong to the One who loves us more than anyone in the world. The Holy Spirit uses our gifts and graces to empower us to be the presence of Jesus in the world.

Gail and I have been married for 48 years. Our rings represent our love and commitment to each other. We are each helping the other to live their best life. The great gift of marriage is its ability to make both people a better person. The holy covenant we live with God will always mold us into our better self. As Gail and I are shaped by the personality of the other, we are being shaped by the nature of God.

Our marriage to God was made possible through Christ. Jesus was God's wooing love personified. Jesus led us to that moment when we desire to live in union with God and others. At Pentecost the divine ring was placed upon spiritual fingers.

What do you think Paul meant when he wrote the Holy Spirit is the seal of God's redemption in Christ upon us? Are you comforted by the reality that you are sealed to

God? Can you share a moment when the Holy Spirit empowered you to be the presence of Christ for another?

Summary

I confess this lesson proved overwhelming. It contains so much and yet leaves me bowing in awe over the mystery of God's love. All of the examples from my life, and the understanding I have of the text, fall far short. Yet, I can sense what Paul so excitedly wanted to say. God's grace was so wonderful Paul continued one attempt after another to describe it. The will of God revealed in Jesus opened the door of heaven and allowed blessing upon blessing. For Paul, this was an inexpressible gift. And so, it is for us. Still, just because we struggle to express all that God has done for us, in us, and through us does not diminish the fact that it's all true. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

Almighty God, we pray with hearts overflowing. We bow before you with minds that are always seeking. We serve you with all that we are, for you have given all in Christ. Thank you for the lives of meaning and purpose we enjoy. May your Holy Spirit remind us that we are your precious possession and that we live in that holy covenant that gives us our blessed hope. In Jesus name, Amen.

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