

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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PRAISE FOR THE BLESSING OF GOD (PART I)

Ephesians 1:3-6

There is a story about a poor old rancher in west Texas who became rich because oil was found on his property. He took all the money he made from that discovery and put it in a bank. His banker became familiar with the habits of this old gentleman. Every once in a while the rancher would show up at the bank empty-handed and discouraged, concerned about weather conditions, the high cost of feed, and the low prices he might get as he sold his cattle that year. The banker wouldn't say a word. He knew what needed to be done. He'd bring the old man inside and seat him in the vault. Then he'd bring out several bags of money and say, "These are yours." The old rancher would spend about an hour in there looking at his money, stacking up the dollars and counting them. Then he'd come out and say, "No problem. Ranching is good." The old rancher simply needed reminding of the resources he had.

That is where real encouragement is found – as you understand the resources that are yours, as you know the riches that the Lord has given you. When we are concerned about the things going on in our lives, when you and I are discouraged, we must look at the great spiritual blessings that we have from God. And when we discover what He has done for us, we will praise Him.

Please follow along as I read Ephesians 1:3-14:

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. For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love, He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will – to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

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 hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having 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.

Did you catch how this passage is flowing with praise to God? This passage was written by the apostle Paul to the church at Ephesus. He begins with a note of thanks to God for “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms” and then keeps going and going, phrase upon phrase, doctrine after doctrine, and truth upon truth, as he lists these benefits. Commentators call this great passage “a kaleidoscope of dazzling lights and shifting colors” and an “operatic overture” of unrestrained praise to God. This week and next, we will unpack this passage verse by verse and consider what the apostle Paul has written. My prayer for you – and even more for myself – is that we will go back to these words again and again and be reminded of what God has done for us.

Let’s look at our passage. Verse 3 says God “*has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*” So, what are we to make of the word “spiritual” in verse 3? Do our blessings come to us by the Holy Spirit? Verses 11-14 teach that. But does the passage teach that these are other-worldly rather than material blessings? The phrase “in the heavenly realms” seems to imply that our primary benefits from God are related to our citizenship in heaven rather than our comfort and pleasure here on earth.

It is not that God does not give material blessings – food, clothing, shelter. Indeed He does! The Bible promises in passages such as Philippians 4:19, that God will meet our every need. Jesus told us not to worry about what we eat or drink, but to “*seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*” Material provisions are important, but when measured against spiritual blessings they do not compare. They are only temporary. Consider what Charles Spurgeon writes:

Our thanks are due to God for all temporal blessings; they are more than we deserve. But our thanks ought to go to God in thunders of hallelujahs for spiritual blessings. A new heart is better than a new coat. To feed on Christ is better than to have the best earthly food. To be an heir of God is better than being the heir of the greatest nobleman.

So, according to Ephesians 1, what are these spiritual blessings for which we are to give “thunders of hallelujahs?” For which gracious acts of God on our behalf are we to give this kaleidoscope of praise?

CHOSEN BEFORE THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

The works of God are described in Trinitarian language – given to us by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Our spiritual blessings come from the Father, they become ours in Jesus Christ, and they are applied by the Holy Spirit. Put another way, the Father chooses, the Son redeems, and the Holy Spirit seals us for our inheritance. This morning, we’ll focus on the Father’s work in verses 3-6 and next week consider the blessings from the Son and Spirit in verses 7-14.

Verse 4 tells us, “*For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight.*” Here we are dealing with what is called the doctrine of election, the fact that God chose us to become Christians. This controversial doctrine gets its name from the Greek word *eklektos*, translated here as “He chose.” God elects people to be saved. Just as voters elect a

candidate and thereby choose him or her for public office, God chooses those who will be His sons and daughters.

Most people find the doctrine of election difficult to swallow, even though the Bible's teachings are clear. Theologian John Stott asks the question, "Didn't I choose God?" and answers "Yes, indeed you did, and freely, but only because in eternity God had first chosen you." "Didn't I decide for Christ?" "Yes, indeed you did, and freely, but only because in eternity God had first decided for you." Election is a fantastic concept.

The good news is offered to us, but if we don't respond we will never obtain the benefit of it. But if we do respond, if we come to Christ, if we believe in Him, then we discover a great fact: God began the process, it was He who chose us, and we have been drawn to Him by His Spirit at work in us.

So, when did our election take place? Paul says we were chosen by God "before the foundation of the world," in eternity past, long before you and I were born and could do anything good or bad, before God created the heavens and the earth, before Jesus lay in a manger and died on the cross.

Mathew 25:34 (the verse at the top of your bulletin) makes this same point. Jesus speaks of the last judgment, "*Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'*" In John 17:24, the record of Jesus' prayer just hours before His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus said, "*Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.'*"

Friends, this is so very important. If those destined for everlasting life were elected before the foundation of the world, then all the glory for their salvation belongs to God and Him alone. If God chose us before we ever existed, none of us can lay claim to any merit of our own – not our good works, not our wise decisions, not even our faith. The things we do – going to church, getting baptized, being nice to people or trying to obey the Ten Commandments are not factored in. God has the responsibility and He gets the credit. He gets the glory. When we understand this, we can pray "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

CHOSEN TO BE HOLY AND BLAMELESS

So what was God's purpose in election? Why did He bother to choose any of us? Look at the end of verse 4. God chose us "to be holy and blameless in His sight." This is what I call the "Wow!" statement of the passage. God does not chose us because we are holy (or because we will be holy) but in order that we will be holy and blameless. So that you and I will appear before God without the stain and guilt of our sin.

Let me ask you, "Did you get up this morning feeling holy and blameless?" I don't mean thinking that you were OK with your spouse or your roommate or Mom and Dad. I mean, did you sense that you were without fault or guilt before God, that you are pure when standing in front of the holy and living Lord of the universe? Look around you for a moment. Do the folks on your right and left appear holy and blameless?

According to this verse, every Christian, every one of us chosen by God and enabled to put faith in Him are holy, set apart, consecrated to God (that's what holy means) and without fault. Do you see what that does for our sense of identity as Christians? We are not accidental members of Christ's body. There are no second class citizens in the church of Jesus Christ. We are all chosen of the Father, selected to be members of the family of God. What a fantastic privilege!

How can that be? We are chosen in Him, that is, in Christ, to be holy. In verse 5, we're told that in election, *we have been predestined to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ*. The idea of predestination carries the same meaning as election. Here, we get an idea of just what it means to be chosen by God. We are adopted as sons, able to address the Lord as "Abba Father" intimately as a son or daughter would relate to their loving Father.

The Roman idea of adoption meant the taking of a person to carry on as an heir. Adoption involved an elaborate legal procedure culminating in the father presenting his new son before the Roman magistrate. Old family ties were severed and the privileges of the new family were bestowed.

Do you remember the classic movie *Ben Hur*? The character played by Charlton Heston, Judah Ben-Hur was a Jewish prince who was taken as a slave by the Romans. While a slave, he saves the life of the Roman consul Quintus Arrius and ultimately is adopted by Arrius and given the signet ring to show that he, as the son, had the power and authority and privileges of the consul. That rise from slave to royal heir illustrates what happens in election – our elevation from enslaved sinner to adopted child of God.

When we are adopted, God sees us differently than we see ourselves. Philippians 2:15 reminds us that God works out our salvation *so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation*. It is being adopted as a child of God that makes us stand before God as holy and without fault, not our own efforts at being righteous. The same in Colossians 1:22, *But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation*.

Remember that our adoption as blameless sons and daughters was determined before we were ever made, before the creation of the world. The blessing of our righteousness before the eyes of God is not our own, but has been given to us in Christ. Hebrews 9:14 tells us *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!* British pastor Martin Lloyd-Jones says: "If you leave out the 'in Christ,' you will never get any blessings at all."

Isn't that great? Election does not just bring us half-way. It brings us all the way. It does not just result in our conversion. In the eyes of God, the Father's sovereign choice makes us like our beloved Savior. Before we were ever born, the Father chose us to be holy. Not because we deserve it, but because He loves us and wanted to save us.

So, Paul is filled with praise and rapture because of his unworthiness. He is excited because he remembers that he is no longer dead in his transgressions, no longer an object of wrath. He does not try to explain how, but realizes our proper response must be adoration. The emphasis is not on us, but on Christ. We were predestined for the praise of His glorious grace.

CONCLUSION

Why does the Father elect us? Because He wants to. That's the idea expressed in verses 5-6: *according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved.* For His own good reasons. Because He delights in loving us. Not because we deserve it!

D.A. Carson tells a funny story that may help us grasp the significance of what God has done:

Two college students, Charles and Susan, are walking down a beach hand in hand at the end of the academic year. They have kicked off their sandals, and the wet sand squishes between their toes. Charles turns to Susan, gazes deeply into her large, hazel eyes, and says, "Susan, I love you. I really do." What does he mean?

Probably, he means: "Susan, you mean everything to me. I can't live without you. Your sparkling good humor, your beautiful eyes, the scent of your hair – everything about you transfixes me. I love you!"

What he most certainly does not mean is something like this: "Susan, quite frankly you have such a bad case of halitosis it would embarrass a herd of unwashed, garlic-eating elephants. Your nose is so bulbous you belong in the cartoons. Your hair is so greasy it could lubricate an eighteen-wheeler. Your personality makes Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan look like wimps. But I love you!"

So now God comes to us and says, "I love you." What does He mean? Does He mean "You mean everything to me. I can't live without you. Your personality, your witty conversation, your beauty, your smile – everything about you transfixes me. Heaven would be boring without you. I love you!"? That, after all, is pretty close to what some therapeutic approaches to the love of God spell out. We must be pretty wonderful because God loves us.

When He says He loves us, does not God rather mean something like the following? "Morally speaking, you are the people of the halitosis, the bulbous nose, the greasy hair, the disjointed knees, the abominable personality. Your sins have made you disgustingly ugly. But I love you anyway, not because you are attractive, but because it is my nature to love."

Friends, God loves us. Our blessing is to be adopted as His children, to be set apart for Him and called holy in His sight. Not because we are. We do not pursue holiness in order to be blessed by God! If the aim of your Christian life is to get God to love you by obeying Him to be assured of God's love for you, then you'll never get very far. But if your obedience is because you realize that God has not chosen you because of your holiness but because of His love in Jesus Christ, it will make all the difference in the world.

When we discover what He has done for us, we will praise Him. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world. Spurgeon reminds this preacher to hear and believe God's Word:

If you think little of what God has done for you, you will do very little for Him; but if you have a great notion of His great mercy to you, you will be greatly grateful to your gracious God.

When we remember what He has done for us, we will praise Him.