

# With Great Predestination Comes Great Responsibility

Ephesians 1:3-6 April 12, 2023

**Ephesians 1:3-6 - <sup>3</sup>Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ. <sup>4</sup>For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him. <sup>5</sup>He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, <sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One.**

I was surprised to learn that Johnny Cash's iconic song *A Boy Named Sue* wasn't written by the Man in Black, but by someone quite unexpected: Shel Silverstein, the celebrated children's author of *The Giving Tree* and *Giraffe And A Half*.<sup>1</sup>

In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul praises God for His eternal plan of salvation. But this passage is not a dry, doctrinal dissertation. It is a hymn broken up into three stanzas.<sup>2</sup> Maybe you've already heard that, in the Greek, verses 3 through 14 are one long, unbroken sentence of 202 words.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars actually *criticize* Paul for it. One calls it a clumsy and monstrous sentence.<sup>4</sup> Another says, "[Verses 3-14 are] Lengthy, cumbersome phrases, weighed down with chains of synonyms and nouns qualified by overloaded adjectives."<sup>5</sup> Everyone's a critic! Complaints like these miss the point. Paul is giving us a *song*. It's fitting since he will later expressly command Christians to speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.<sup>6</sup>

Paul's song, in essence, says, "Can you believe what God has done?" It is a song about the wonders and significance of salvation.<sup>7</sup> It's dense. It begins by highlighting five elements of God's salvation which are umbrella categories under which we receive thousands of blessings from God.<sup>8</sup>

It's important that we recognize that this passage is not primarily doctrinal, but is an act of passionate praise to God.<sup>9</sup> When we bring it into English and into the doctrinal battlefield, it's easy to lose sight of the original purpose of the song. Thomas Neufeld writes, "*A price is paid for this ease of reading...We lose the experience of reading or hearing the passage as one long, unbroken, deliberately exhausting recitation of how God has blessed us.*"<sup>10</sup>

Paul's song celebrates God's blessings and reminds us of the consequences and responsibilities we now have as a result. It reminds us of the *greatness* of God. And the song reminds us that this life with Christ is only going to get better. We're living now just in the *down payment* stage.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shel\\_Silverstein](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shel_Silverstein)

<sup>2</sup> *Holman Concise Bible Commentary*

<sup>3</sup> Darrell Bock *Ephesians: An Introduction And Commentary*

<sup>4</sup> Markus Barth *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation And Commentary On Chapters 1-3*

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Neufeld *Ephesians* (Neufeld goes on to suggest that Paul's rhetoric has a positive purpose, despite his earlier description of the passage.)

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 5:19

<sup>7</sup> Klyne Snodgrass *Ephesians*

<sup>8</sup> R. Kent Hughes *Ephesians: The Mystery Of The Body Of Christ*

<sup>9</sup> Neufeld

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

But, this section of Scripture is a doctrinal battleground. As I read our verses maybe you had that feeling...it's like the feeling when April 15th comes around...that feeling that a bill is coming due. I've got good news: Tax day isn't April 15th. It isn't even April 18th - not for Californians. Due to storms, mudslides and other natural disasters this winter, the IRS has given residents of Alabama, California and Georgia until October 16, 2023 to file!

But we're talking about doctrine here. As we read these verses, maybe it felt like Calvinism came knocking with its doctrine of unconditional election. Robert Dale writes, "*On the first few verses of this epistle the Calvinistic theory of election and predestination has been supposed to rest as on foundations of eternal granite.*"<sup>11</sup>

Is that true? This isn't the only passage where election is debated, but it's one of the major ones. Calvinist doctrine interprets verses 4 and 5 as saying that God, in eternity past, picked some human beings to be saved and the rest to be damned. Now, before I continue, let me say that we love our Reformed brothers and sisters. I'm not saying they're not Christians or anything like that. But this is a doctrinal hill on which we are willing to contend.

One Calvinistic scholar writes, "*verse four...specifies the action of God in eternity whereby He has fixed in advance the destiny of certain people.*"<sup>12</sup> That Paul is describing God's "*selection of certain people, to the exclusion of certain others.*" But is that what Paul is saying?

There's an incredibly important phrase in Paul's song - one he uses often in his writings, but *ten times* between verses 3 and 14, and that's the phrase "in Christ." Look at verse four again: God "*chose us in Him* before the foundation of the world." Let's pause to consider what is actually being said contextually and the implications of our interpretation versus the Calvinistic interpretation.

At this point that many Calvinists will say, "*Ephesians says God chose who would be saved from eternity past. We can't understand how that squares with Him being a God of love, but His ways are higher than our ways, so don't even question it.*"<sup>13</sup> We would say, "No, we're allowed to question that interpretation. Because, *if that is true*, then God's character is *much* different than if it isn't true."

The entire context of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is group, community, the universalness of the Church and the ongoing work of God through the Body He is building. Klyne Snodgrass writes, "*Usually when people speak of divine election, they think of the election of individuals and the benefit to them. But biblical texts have a different emphasis, for election is primarily a corporate term. Nothing in Ephesians 1 focuses on individuals; rather, the text focuses collectively on those who are in Christ. This changes the theology.*"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> R.W. Dale *Lectures On The Ephesians*

<sup>12</sup> Leslie James Crawford *Ephesians 1:3-4 And The Nature Of Election*

<sup>13</sup> H.A. Ironside *Ephesians*

<sup>14</sup> Snodgrass

In Scripture, God repeatedly uses an individual to be the federal representative for a future group. Adam was mankind's representative and through Adam we all inherit sin. You didn't sin in the Garden of Eden, but you are included in the fall because you were represented by Adam. Abraham was the representative of a special people who would later become the nation of Israel, who received the promises and plans of God through their relationship to Abraham.

Christ is the most important representative. He is the Lamb. He is the Head. He is the Chosen Servant. Now, anyone who is *in Christ* is able to receive the blessings of salvation. From eternity past, "God has directed that we be adopted as sons."<sup>15</sup> Who is the 'we' in Paul's statement? All who are *in Christ*. So we would distill the dense phrases of Paul's song this statement by Frank Thielman: God has "determined in advance that those who are in Christ would be His people."<sup>16</sup> Or, if you'd like, "Once in Christ we are caught in the currents of the eternal purposes of the Divine love."<sup>17</sup>

Now, if that doesn't shake the specter of Calvinistic doctrine off your shoulder, here are a few implications and questions we can discuss in order to, hopefully, bring more clarity to Ephesians 1.

Calvinistic doctrine, interpreting Ephesians 1:4, would suggest that chosen people were in Christ before the foundations of the world.<sup>18</sup> But this contradicts several plain statements in Scripture.

Number one: Paul said in Romans 16, "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews...they were in Christ before me." How can that be true if the choosing in Christ happened in eternity past?

Number two: Paul will later say in Ephesians 2 that he and the Ephesians were "Children under wrath as others were also." And that the Ephesians, before they were believers, were *without Christ*. But how can that be if they were sealed by the grace of God before they were born?

Number three: Paul wrote in Romans 8, "There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus." But Jesus said, "Anyone who does not believe is condemned." So, if Calvinistic doctrine is to be believed, a person who is chosen from eternity past but not yet a believer is simultaneously condemned and *not* condemned.<sup>19</sup>

So, what *did* God predestine and what did He choose? He determined beforehand that anyone who was in Christ would not only be saved from death and judgment, but that they would be adopted as sons into the family of God and would be holy and blameless to the praise of His glory.

We see election exemplified through Israel the "chosen" nation. Calvinist doctrine presents election as by-passing and excluding outsiders.<sup>20</sup> What happened in Israel? What happened when Rahab wanted to join the chosen people? Was she excluded? What about Ruth? What about the mixed

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<sup>15</sup> Bock

<sup>16</sup> Frank Thielman *Ephesians*

<sup>17</sup> Dale

<sup>18</sup> Leighton Flowers *A Critique Of Unconditional Election*

<sup>19</sup> These and other arguments are found and discussed in *Calvinism: A Biblical And Theological Critique*

<sup>20</sup> Crawford

multitude of Exodus? What about the people of Gibeon? Were any of them excluded because they weren't original members of the chosen seed of Abraham? No, they were all brought in and accepted when they came in faith. Even Naaman the Aramean was approved by God. He didn't join Israel. He didn't get circumcised. But his faith was accepted by God.

Back to Rahab. Think of her story. She said, "please give me mercy." The men of Israel did not say, "We've chosen the following specific members of your family to be saved." They said, "Anyone who is in your house when judgment comes will be saved. The choice is yours and theirs."

God chose that all who are in Christ will be saved and adopted. So, how can a person be in Christ? By faith. Acts 16: Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. Romans 10: If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. What the New Testament explains is that, From that initial belief your understanding and obedience and love for God will grow. You will mature in your faith. Jesus said in John 14,

**John 14:20-21 - <sup>20</sup>...you will know that I am in my Father, you are in me, and I am in you. <sup>21</sup>The one who has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. And the one who loves me will be loved by my Father. I also will love him and will reveal myself to him."**

In John 17, Jesus said that those who believe in Him through the word of His disciples are one in the Father and the Son. But that doesn't mean a person has to know and do all kinds of things before they are placed in Christ. Simple, thief-on-the-cross faith is sufficient to be placed in Christ and then, *from there*, we are transformed in heart, mind, plan, purpose, and future by the power of God's salvation.

Paul is saying that God determined to save the lost from before the foundation of the earth. It wasn't a strategy session, this work of salvation emanates from *Who* God is.<sup>21</sup> His nature is to save and to reconcile. To be clear, we don't believe that *faith* saves a person. God's *grace* - His work of redemption - is what saves. Through faith we lay hold of the salvation that God has accomplished and now offered freely to us. It's *His* work, not ours. Our faith doesn't save us, it simply is the mechanism by which we receive God's free gift of salvation.

Beyond the controversy, we can see that this amazing, gracious, saving election gives us not only many *blessings*, but also *responsibility*. It's a *calling*. Paul says that God "chose us to be holy and blameless in love before Him. He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace."

In these verses, there are four aspects to our calling now that we're in Christ. We are holy, blameless, adopted children, to the praise of God's glory.

We talked about holiness last time. It means we're called to be separated, dedicated to spiritual purposes, and continually cleaned.

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<sup>21</sup> Snodgrass

Blameless means without blemish.<sup>22</sup> Paul used a word that the Septuagint uses to refer to a sacrificial animal.<sup>23</sup> Now, God is the One Who accomplishes our cleansing and sanctification. He began the work, He will complete it. He is the Author and Finisher of our faith. But, as the Bible reveals, we have a freed will and we are able to cooperate or resist the work that God is doing in our lives. In Romans 12, Paul said, "I urge you [brothers and sisters] to present your bodies as a living sacrifice." On a spiritual level we have the choice to be like Isaac, who willingly submitted to the sacrificial calling from his father. As we cooperate in this work of unblemishing, God is able to transform us and renew our minds and we are able to discern the will of God.

Next, our calling is to be adopted as sons through Christ Jesus. And what a key facet this is. God's desire is that we have the kind of relationship with Him that Jesus has with Him.<sup>24</sup> That closeness. That affection. A tender, personal relation. God blesses us, we bless Him. God loved us first, we love Him back. God pours out His grace to us, we pour out our lives to Him.

Next, our calling is to be part of the praise of God's glorious grace. One of the great purposes of your life is to bring praise to the glory of God. Paul is demonstrating that the more we know about God, the more we realize what He's done, the more worship and thankfulness will explode from our hearts. It's like combining vinegar and baking soda. The reaction is *going* to happen.

Robert Dale writes, "*God should be great to the imagination, filling it with splendor; great to the intellect, commanding its most reverent homage and raising it to its loftiest activity; great to the heart, inspiring it with passionate affection, with perfect trust, with deep gratitude, with glorious hope, and with the awe which will restrain from sin.*"<sup>25</sup>

If we understand salvation, the result will be *praise*. Back in 2007 when the iPhone was announced, Steve Ballmer, then CEO of Microsoft, said there was "no chance" it would get any market share.<sup>26</sup> He didn't understand what it was. He didn't understand that this device was going to change the world. Had he understood, it would not only have changed what he said, it would've changed the choices he and his company would make as a result.

Paul will explain to the Ephesians that, as we live out our calling, we discover His desires for our lives. He's prepared works ahead of us time for us to do and we are able to discern those things and accomplish them in God's power and in the grace that He has given to each one of us.

Paul's song encourages us to *celebrate* our God and His salvation. Through God's grace we experience *thousands upon thousands* of blessings. And even though we live in a fallen world, even though we're still waiting for the day when we're fully, finally presented spotless, without sin or the desire to sin, the promises of God are already true right here, right now. R. Kent Hughes

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<sup>22</sup> *Bible Knowledge Commentary*

<sup>23</sup> Thielman

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Dale

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bensin/2017/01/09/these-are-the-people-who-thought-the-iphone-would-fail/>

writes, "*Temporarily* we live here on earth; but *spiritually* we live in the heavenly realms where Christ lives. Paul calls us to immerse ourselves in this truth and to celebrate."<sup>27</sup>

Now, we need to think rightly about the blessings of God. The New Testament does *not* teach health and wealth for every believer. What does verse 3 say? God has blessed us with every *spiritual blessing in the heavens*. That doesn't mean God never gives material blessings, but His blessings flow from His grace, His love, and His will for your life and for the Church. Some of those blessings are *not* things we would select from the blessing vending machine. Matthew 5: Blessed are those who are persecuted. 1 Peter 4: Blessed are those who are ridiculed for the name of Christ. In Revelation 2, martyrdom carries a special blessing from God.

Christian life is not a celebration of always being comfortable or profitable or successful. It is a celebration of that fact that the Living God is doing an eternal work with us. In verse 6, Paul says, "to the praise of His glorious grace that He lavished on us in the Beloved One." Literally translated it is, "to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has *begraded* us with."<sup>28</sup> You are *begraded* by the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ.

And so, as we close this part of Paul's beautiful song, we can consider. I'm not the Holy Spirit in your life, so I can't tell you what sort of specific application you may need to make. But here are a couple of questions we can each ask ourselves based on how Paul has described the treasure trove<sup>29</sup> of salvation and the consequences of laying hold of it.

First, how do I think of God? Is He the God of personal, passionate, generous grace and kindness that Paul is presenting? Is He a Father in my life? Is He great in my mind? Is He King in my heart?

Second, am I person who brings praise to God's glory? Is there a flow of worship and thankfulness and excitement about Who God is and what He's done?

Third, is my life producing the predestined fruits of holiness, blamelessness, and adoption that God intends to bring out of my walk with Him?

Fourth, am I remaining in Christ? In John 15 Jesus had those words for us: Remain in Me so that we can bear fruit and be glorified and progress in our discipleship. It's been God's plan all along, we want to take up the treasures and the responsibilities of such a great salvation.

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<sup>27</sup> Hughes

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Bock