

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino  
Ephesians 1:3-14  
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### Living Thankfully

Acts 19 provides some context behind the Apostle Paul's letter to the Church in Ephesus. During one of his missionary journeys to Ephesus, so many people turned away from worshiping the goddess Artemis and toward Christ that it created a disturbance. People would come from all over the Mediterranean world to worship her at the temple in Ephesus and buy silver statues for their home shrines. When people started following Jesus, they stopped buying the statues which got Paul into trouble with a particular silversmith named Demetrius.

This past week at Vacation Bible School, we learned how Demetrius stirred up the other silver shrine makers because Paul was destroying their ability to make money. Demetrius claimed that Paul was discrediting their goddess and desecrating her temple. That made the crowds so angry that they turned on Paul and forced him out of town before being killed. So Paul's letter to the Church in Ephesus was written to young Christians who continued living in this setting.

The Scripture that Joan asked us to focus on today is from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. It is taken from the first part of the letter or the thanksgiving which was typically the opening part of a letter in their day. Seems fitting because if you know anything about Joan and ask her how she is doing, she will tell you "Living Thankfully."

Join me as we read this great thanksgiving from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians 1:3-14.

**3** 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. **4** For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love **5** he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— **6** to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. **7** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace **8** that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, **9** he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, **10** to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

**11** 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, **12** in

order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. **13** And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, **14** who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

There are a couple things I want to lift up from this text today that I think will help us grasp what the Apostle Paul was trying to convey. What spiritual blessings do we receive in Christ? What does it mean to be predestined or chosen in Christ? How does this help us to be thankful? And then finally how can we live more thankfully in our own lives today?

Right off the bat, Paul wrote, "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." So we see that these are not material blessings that we can put our hands on but rather spiritual blessings that come from above. I wonder if Paul made that distinction because the people of Ephesus were so used to being able to put their hands upon physical statues of the goddess of Artemis and expect her to provide them with material blessings.

Paul said these are spiritual blessings from the heavenly realms. Not material ones fashioned here on earth..

So what are they? He states them clearly.

We are predestined or chosen in Christ.

We are adopted as children into God's family by faith.

We are redeemed or bought back through the blood of Jesus Christ.

We are forgiven of our sins.

We are freely given grace which is what we do not deserve.

And finally we receive wisdom and understanding through the gift of the Holy Spirit which Jesus imparts to who all who believe upon his name.

Each of these are spiritual blessings that we cannot see or even fully grasp.

I don't aim to go through each of these in-depth but I do want to tackle one of these spiritual blessings. We are predestined or chosen in Christ.

Twice in this text, Paul used the Greek word *eklego* which mean to select, to make a choice, or to choose. And twice Paul used the Greek word *pro-ORIZO* which means to determine before, to ordain, or to predestine.

So there is this sense that God decided long long ago, before the beginning of time, before any humans walked this earth, that God would predestine or choose in Christ a family, with sons and daughters through faith in Christ and not by physical

birth. God could have chosen physical lineage for a family tree, but instead, God chose a plan based on spiritual blessing, and not material ones.

We are not chosen because there is anything special about ourselves, lest we can boast. But we are chosen IN Christ.

So that begs to ask “What makes us IN Christ?” In verse 13, Paul states very clearly, “You were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth...and believed it.” And immediately in that moment, the Holy Spirit plants in us a deposit, a guarantee that we belong to God with a promise that nothing could ever separate us from God...and that what belongs to God will return to God one day.

That is Good News.

Reformer John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* argued that in God’s sovereignty, God chooses some to be included in God’s family through faith in Christ and to be saved, while others are not. This is known as double predestination.

But not all Presbyterian’s believe in Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination. Twentieth Century theologian Karl Barth argued instead that Christ alone is the chosen and predestined one in God’s sovereign plan. And that we who believe in Christ are included in, wrapped up in, gathered up into Christ’s chosenness and predestination. That’s why Paul so clearly stated that we are “in Christ.” Otherwise we might think that somehow we earned that chosenness or were predestined by our own merits and not on the unmerited favor of God.

So I would say that chosenness and predestination is part of God’s general ordained plan for humanity, but how it plays out in each person’s life depends on how they receive the Good News of Jesus.

The same goes for our adoption as children in God’s family of faith. It’s not that we are special so that God only chooses us. But somehow in God’s mysterious ways, some of us hear the Good News of Jesus, accept this truth in their hearts, which takes root so that it produces good fruit down the road. Just like in the Parable of Sower from last week. But then some people do not. This was God’s plan ordained from the beginning. Scripture tells us that God’s sovereign plan is that “none would perish, but that everyone would come to repentance”and receive eternal life.<sup>1</sup>

I also wonder if being chosen or predestined in Christ is not about position or prestige but purpose. Being chosen or predestined doesn’t make us any better than anyone else. But it does place a responsibility upon us to live in such a way that brings honor and glory and praise to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Think of God’s initial call to Abram in Genesis 12.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Peter 3:9

The Lord said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; [and listen to this]... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”<sup>2</sup>

So we can see that Abram was chosen or predestined by God out of all the people on the earth at the time to receive this special blessing and calling. Not because there was anything particularly special about Abram or his people. But through God’s sovereignty, God chose Abram and predestined his family to serve a particular purpose throughout the entire world... To be a channel of God’s blessing to the rest of the world and the root through which Jesus Christ the redeemer would one day come.

In the same way, we who are in Christ and have Christ in us have been chosen or predestined, set aside, to be channels of God’s spiritual blessing to the rest of the world.

So how does this knowledge help us to be thankful?

If Christ is in us and we are in Christ, then it’s not up to us to have to be, do, or live a certain way. Instead it is about offering ourselves as living sacrifices to God, not being conformed to the patterns of the world, but being transformed by the renewing of our minds which the Apostle Paul said was our spiritual act of worship.<sup>3</sup> This is about allowing the power of the Holy Spirit to take over and change us from within instead of trying to change ourselves. This was another lesson we learned this past week at Vacation Bible School.

When one’s thinking is transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, we look at things differently than the world does. Take suffering for example. The world looks at suffering as something terrible that happens for which we should feel sorry for ourselves. But the Apostle Paul, as a follower of Jesus, who also suffered greatly under the Roman Emperor Nero, challenges us to allow God to transform our suffering into something positive and good.

In fact, Paul told new Christians in Rome who were also suffering terribly under Nero, “And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance [which is the ability to not give up]; perseverance, character; character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12:1-3

<sup>3</sup> Romans 12:1-3

<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:3-5

He also said to them, “And we know that in all things, [what things? ALL THINGS.] God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those who God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.”<sup>5</sup>

There’s that Greek word again, pro-orizo. To determine before, to ordain, or to predestine. God predestined his children to become like Jesus.

So what this tells us is that we can even be thankful for the suffering that we experience because we don’t know how God might use that suffering to create something beautiful in us which at the time we may not see or understand.

Let me see if I can better paint the picture through a story about Corrie ten Boom. Corrie ten Boom was Dutch watchmaker who hid Jews from Nazi arrest and deportation during World War II. When her actions were discovered by the Nazis, Corrie and her sister, Betsy, were sent to a Nazi concentration camp called Ravensbruck.

The barracks in which they stayed were terribly overcrowded and flea-infested. They had been able to miraculously smuggle a Bible into the camp, and in that Bible they had read that in all things they were to give thanks and that God can use anything for good.

Betsy decided that this meant thanking God for the fleas which was too much for Corrie to embrace. Betsy insisted, so Corrie gave in and prayed to God, thanking him even for the fleas.

Over the next several months a strange thing happened: The guards never entered their barracks. This meant that the women were not assaulted. It also meant that they were able to hold open Bible studies and prayer meetings in the heart of a Nazi concentration camp. Through this, countless numbers of women came to faith in Christ.

Only at the end did they discover why the guards had left them alone and would not enter into their barracks: It was because of the fleas.

So when we are challenged to see the good in our suffering, let’s take a moment to remember the fleas of Ravensbruck. And thank God anyway.<sup>6</sup>

How then can we live more thankfully in our own lives today?

Again the Apostle Paul exhorted the Church in Philippi amidst a divisive conflict that sometimes rejoicing and thanksgiving is a conscious choice we must make. Paul said, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:28-29

<sup>6</sup> James Emery White, “Thankful for the Fleas,” Christianity.com Blog (2017)

requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”<sup>7</sup>

That’s what I love about Joan Detrick’s motto “Living Thankfully.” No matter what Joan is going through, good or bad, living thankfully directs her gaze upwards and doesn’t focus on the suffering. Again, we have no idea how God might use that suffering for good later on.

“Research has [also] shown that practicing gratitude boosts the immune system, bolsters resilience to stress, lowers depression, increases feelings of energy, determination, and strength, and even helps you sleep better at night.

In fact, few things have been more repeatedly and empirically vetted than the connection between gratitude and overall happiness and well-being.

In a [current] survey, [researchers] found that while “more than 90% of people think gratitude makes you happier and gives you a more fulfilled life ... less than half regularly express gratitude.”<sup>8</sup>

As for myself, I find during difficult seasons of life that keeping a gratitude journal is helpful. Again it is an intentional act of focusing on what is good around me and not stewing on what is bad. It shows me that there is more good than I might think.

We can also share our gratitude with others whether in word or in deed. If someone has done something kind for you, pay it forward and do something kind for someone else.

Say thank you. Write thank you notes. Note writing is a lost art and a real treasure when you get a hand written thank you note in the mail.

Include a time of thanksgiving in your prayers. We don’t always need to ask God for things. But we also need to say thank you for what prayers God has already answered.

I’ll close with this one last story of how living thankfully continues to impact us Americans every year. “In the fall of 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued two landmark statements. The first was the famous Gettysburg Address in which Lincoln commemorated the battlefield of Gettysburg acknowledging the horror of the American Civil War. The other statement, made just weeks before, [was issued on] October 3, 1863, [when] President Lincoln instituted the first official Thanksgiving holiday.

Lincoln wrote, “It has seemed to me fit and proper that [the gracious gifts of the Most High God] should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American People.” Thus, Lincoln set apart the last Thursday of November as “a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our

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<sup>7</sup> Philippians 4:4-7

<sup>8</sup> Brett & Kate McKay, “The Spiritual Disciplines: Gratitude” Podcast #459, ArtofManliness.com (11-29-18)

beneficent Father.” Apparently, in the midst of the worst [internal] war our nation had ever seen, Lincoln thought the time was ripe for gratitude.”<sup>9</sup>

And so may we too embrace Joan’s motto of living thankfully. May it begin with our gratitude to God for having been chosen and predestined in Christ as beloved members of God’s family. May it change the way we look at suffering. And may our gratitude spill out onto others to the praise, and honor, and glory of Jesus Christ.

Amen!

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<sup>9</sup> Chris Pappalardo, “This Thanksgiving, I’m Thankful for Difficult People,” CT magazine (11-22-18)