

February 5, 2012

Rom. 8:28-30 / I Timothy 1:8-12 / Ephesians 1:1-6
Ephesians -- Praising the Wonders of God's Glorious Grace

Today we begin our long-awaited sermon series through the book of Ephesians. (At least it's been long-awaited by me). Because about 1/2 way through the book of Romans (back in 2003) I told my congregation in Honduras that the next book I would take them through was Ephesians!
That was 9 years ago.

It's a book that has gradually become (over the years) one of my three favorites (alongside Isaiah and Romans). And for many reasons:

1st) Because it was the book that helped me understand how and why I was saved. It also helped me make sense out of all that had happened in my life.

2ndly) It's the one book of the Bible, which more than any other, explains what grace is and why it is that it's so breathtaking & thrilling.

And Last) It's precious to me, because it's the book God has directed me to (over and over again) to answer a prayer I prayed long ago (when I was 18 or 19), asking God to do two things (if He was really there): Show me He was real and show me what true love is. Not so much in terms of human love / or romantic love / but in terms of real love -- ultimate love -- the love of God.

And in answering that prayer, God has led me over, and over, and over again, to Ephesians! Until I realized that the greatest expression of His love which any human being can ever know or experience / is the entirely un-merited and free gift of His grace bestowed upon us in spite of our sin and unworthiness. Grace is the highest and most exalted expression of love.

I asked God to show me what love was, and He led me time and again, to focus upon His grace. And THAT, my friends, is what the book of Ephesians is all about!

Verse for verse, Ephesians speaks about the grace of God MORE than any other book in the whole Bible. In fact, as Paul states in v. 7 of this first chapter

/ and v. 7 of chapter 2 / one of his primary aims in writing this Epistle is to display in the greatest detail, the **"riches"** (1:7) / or better yet, **"the incomparable riches of God's grace"** (2:7).

And He does it (as we read in vv. 3 and 6) that believers might be led to praise and adore Him for it. He shares everything he does, that it might be, **"to the praise His glorious grace"** (v. 6) / or as he says two other times (in vv. 12 & 14) **"to the praise of His glory."**

Which means that if I correctly convey the truths of God's grace spoken of in these chapters, the result should be HEARTS and MINDS that are filled with an ever-increasing desire to praise Him for the enormity of the grace He has so inexplicably chosen to lavish upon us, who by His grace, have come to believe.

This letter was John Calvin's favorite NT epistle. / A.T. Robinson called it, **"the crown of St. Paul's writings."** / And Samuel Colderidge called it, **"the divinest composition of man,"** and, **"the Queen of the Epistles."**

And John Mackay (former president of Princeton Theological Seminary) who was converted by reading it as a boy, would later write: It is the **"greatest,"** and **"maturest"** and **"for our time, the most relevant of all Paul's works."** / It is, **"The distilled essence of the Christian religion,"** and, **"the most consummate compendium of our holy Christian faith."** / It is, he said, **"Pure music... truth that sings; doctrine set to music."**

In fact, it was so precious to him that he struggled to find words that would convey just how much he valued it. I feel the same way. In fact, I'd be dishonest if I didn't tell you up front that my greatest hope in taking you through this letter, is that you also would come to love it as much as I (and those others) do. That's what happens when you love something. You want others to love it as much as you do.

So, with that as my introduction to Ephesians, let's take a look at our passage -- verse by verse -- and consider what it says, starting obviously with Paul's greeting and introduction of himself in v 1. Because there, the **FIRST** thing we discover actually sets the tone for the rest of the letter. There he writes: **"Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus BY THE WILL OF GOD..."**

That is, by the design and eternal decree and sovereign determination of God, and NOT because Paul himself wanted to be, or chose to be an apostle.

Paul did not volunteer for the role of an apostle. He hated Christianity! He considered it a cult and fought against it with all his might, even arresting and persecuting unto death those who were Jesus' disciples. Which is why he was as surprised as any to find out what God had told Ananias (only days after his traumatic experience on the road to Damascus): **"This man (Paul) is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles..."**

It's similar to the call of Jeremiah, where God says: **"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as a prophet to the nations."** He didn't choose to be a prophet; he simply discovered he'd been chosen, and thus didn't really have a choice!

And I stress that because it shows what Paul believes about God. That God chooses certain individuals / for certain tasks / long before they ever think about doing them. / And even wears down their resistance to doing His will when they, as Jesus put it, **"kick against the pricks"** (or fight against the inevitable).

Sometimes God will not take "no" for an answer. And in very dramatic fashion he will wear down their resistance to His will, as with Paul, whom He knocked to the ground / and blinded with the light of His glory / before informing him that He had chosen him to be an apostle of the very faith and Lord Jesus he had hated and persecuted and reviled.

Paul did not come to Christ willingly. He fought it tooth and nail until God, by His grace, won him over. And it's the nature of Paul's conversion that helps us understand his view of election and predestination, which he goes on to speak of in verses 4-6 as a, **"blessing"** / and an expression of the **"riches of God's grace"** / and the foremost reason our hearts should well up with praise to God.

James S. Stewart probably put it better than anyone else ever has, when he said of Paul's great thoughts of election and predestination: **"We shall never understand this doctrine as it appears in the epistles, until we realize it runs back**

to the personal experience of a man, who, by the fact of his own conversion, discovered himself to be elected by God -- marked out by divine decree for service and ambassadorship..." "God set me apart from my very birth," writes Paul in Gal. 1:15, "and CALLED me by His grace... Predestination, in this sense, is just another name for grace..."

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point, found in the second half of v. 1, where Paul says: ***"To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus."*** It's a verse which tells us precisely, and even exclusively, who it is that Paul is writing to in this letter. And unlike the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which were written to anyone who might pick them up and read them / or books like Acts, Romans, and Corinthians which have sections that are intended to address both believer and unbeliever / as well as people for the faith and opposed to it -- this letter is different.

Because in the entire letter there is not one admonition that is addressed to, or aimed at, the unbeliever. It is written to: ***"the SAINTS in Ephesus, the FAITHFUL in Christ Jesus."*** Or we could simply say it is written to, "Saints or Faithful Christians"... period, as a way of showing them how richly they've been blessed (v. 3) / and should for that reason, lift their hearts in praise and greater adoration of their God (v.1, 12 and 14) / and hopefully, as a result, get to know Him better (v.17).

So, unlike OTHER books of the Bible, which were written with the intent of addressing, or reaching unbelievers, Ephesians is not. Paul isn't writing to everyone at large / nor even everyone who attends the church there in Ephesus. / He can't be! / Because what he writes throughout this epistle applies ONLY to those God has chosen (v. 4) / and predestined in love (v. 5a) / and graciously adopted as His children for no other reason than that it pleased Him to do so (v. 5b).

It's written ONLY to those who have been redeemed and forgiven of all their sins (v.7). / Those who have already, "put their hope in Christ," (v. 12) / and already, "been included in Christ" (v. 13) / and already "believed," and been, "sealed by the Spirit," and made to be, "God's possession" (vv.13-14).

In that sense, Ephesians is one of the most non-evangelistic of all Paul's epistles. Because its intended audience is exclusively regenerate, believing, born again, Spirit-birthered and sanctified saints, who have been **"saved by grace, through faith,"** that they may do the good works which **"God prepared in advance for them to do"** (2:1-10).

That's one of the reasons that other than 2 verses in chap. 2 (vv. 8-9) / you will seldomly hear this book preached on in a seeker-driven or highly evangelistic churches / where the primary aim is to reach the lost. Because it's not written to the lost, it's written only to the saved.

Paul's aim in this letter is NOT to bring people to faith / but to mature them in the faith / AFTER they've come to have faith. That much should be plain to anyone who merely glances at the greeting in verse 1 / the remaining context of the first chapter / and everything that follows clear through to the end of chapter 6.

Therefore I ask you: **"Are you ready to be stretched and matured in your thinking and your faith?"** Because there isn't any milk in Ephesians. / None! Ephesians is solid meat -- even tough meat with a lot of gristle! / Meat that you'll need to chew on for quite a while / and take an even longer to digest.

Mackay is right. It is, "the most consummate compendium of our holy Christian faith." The "greatest" and "maturest" (deepest) all Paul's letters.

Then **THIRD**, after a general greeting, where Paul wishes them even more of God's unmerited favor and a greater degree of peace with Him, we come to v. 3, which sets the tone of the epistle as a letter of praise and gratitude to God. That's why Mackay said it was "truth that sings."

Paul's goal and divinely-oriented purpose is to cause believers (after hearing of all that God has done for them) to lift their hearts in praise to Him for all the innumerable and undeserved blessings they have received from His hand. It's to get the believers heart to well-up with praise to God.

He could have simply instructed them, or told them, or commanded them to praise God. But he doesn't. Rather, he lists all the blessings God has showered

down upon them, trusting that praise will well-up from within them as a spontaneous response to being told how much God has graced them.

"PRAISE be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," says Paul in v. 3. Why? Because as he goes on to point out, **"He has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus."** That's why we need to praise him: *Because He's showered so many blessings upon us.*

And THAT is the interpretive key to at least the first four chapters:

Because what Paul does in the remainder of this chapter / and on into the next three after this one / is list for us many of those spiritual blessings that God has so richly blessed us with.

And at least in Paul's mind, the FIRST and FOREMOST of all those blessings is the grace of divine election or predestination. The most thrilling of all the blessings God has blessed us with -- the one that comes first to the mind of Paul -- is that out of God's unfathomable grace / and for nothing done or foreseen in us / God chose us and predestined us to be saved. And if you think like Paul, then for you as well, no truth could be more precious to your ears.

That's the **FOURTH** thing we see from these verses. For Paul there is no greater blessing that can be imagined, than the fact that although we did nothing whatsoever to deserve it, and even did everything not to deserve it, "God chose us in Christ, before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in Him." Wow! It boggles the mind even as it thrills the soul!

And here I know I'm treading on holy ground! Believe me, I KNOW! I've spoken on this topic enough to know that there's probably no other topic in the entire Bible, that draws forth (even from believers) a more polarized reaction.

For some (as with Paul) it's the most glorious and precious truth ever revealed / while for others, it sets their spirit on edge, and they fight against it tooth and nail (which is why many pastors never preach on it).

I know I've mentioned before, that when I preached through Romans 8:28-11:36, in Honduras, four families stopped attending. Yet I knew it would happen.

Because I had already led two, two-year Bible Studies through Romans, with the same result. When we came to those same verses, one gentleman and his wife (who had come from the beginning) stop coming. / And another lady stayed, but told me she had grown up in the church all her life, and never heard a sermon or class discussion that even alluded to it!

And at the second study I did on it, yet another man admitted the Bible did use those words, but when we started discussing what they meant, he said, "*My Bible says I can interpret them any way I want.*" He also stopped coming at that point. / And the host (a lady who had been a Southern Baptist for 34 years) told me she had never even heard her pastor mention the word! She got up and stormed out the front door of her own house!

She was so shaken by the thought that God chooses and predestines certain individuals -- that thankfully for me: She actually called her pastor later that week / and he told her that, yes, he did believe it was both biblical and true / but he didn't talk about it or preach on it from the pulpit / because it was so controversial and might split the church.

Sorry folks, I'm not that way! I don't look for controversy / nor do I even like it. / In fact, I prefer to avoid it. / But as a person who's goal in life has been to try and be true to the Word, and vowed at my ordination to, "preach the whole counsel of God" -- there are times when it can't be avoided -- even if it does cause distress / or discomfort / or cause some to leave.

After all, how could we EVER skip over this issue of election / and predestination / when we see that of all the spiritual blessings which God has showered upon us, Paul sees THIS ONE as the one that displays most vividly the GLORIOUS NATURE OF HIS GRACE.

How could one skip over it, when they see that Paul makes election and predestination the two things which show God's grace to be so glorious / and are given as the primary reasons that our hearts should well-up with praise to God. To avoid telling people of these things is to rob God of the praise He deserves, for bestowing upon us the grace that He did, when He chose, elected, and predestined us to be both saved and sanctified.

So let me conclude by looking at the many clues Paul gives to rightly understanding both those things in FOUR distinct areas:

1st) The time of our election by God. **2nd)** The purpose behind our election by God. **3rd)** The instrumental cause of our election by God. And **4th)** The glorious nature of God's grace displayed in our election by God.

So, **1st)** As far as the time of our election, Paul states it plainly. God chose us to be in Christ, **"before the foundation of the world."**

Before He had created anything / and the physical universe was still merely a thought in His mind / and a place called earth or Eden had yet to be formed / and sin had yet to break into paradise and cause the Fall -- back before there was ever a Fall and when there was no sin -- God had already "chosen" (from the Greek word "*ekeletos*" -- "elected") those who would be saved. We were "chosen" before the foundation of the world."

Then **2nd)** We come to the purpose of our election by God. And again, Paul states it plainly. **"He chose us in Christ, to be HOLY and BLAMELESS in His sight."** It was election with a purpose! Not just to "save us," so that we might go to heaven when we die / but to save us that we might be and become, "holy and blameless in His sight."

There is a sanctifying purpose behind God's choosing or predestining us to be saved. To set us apart unto Himself (that's what "holy" means) / and to make us morally and ethically blameless. Not sinless, but without any overt, glaring sin in our lives (Ps. 19:12-13).

That's why Jesus could say: **"By their FRUIT you will know them."** Because He didn't just choose us / He chose us to make us holy and blameless. **"He predestined us,"** as Paul says in Rom. 8:29, **"to be conformed to the likeness of His Son."** Not just saved, but sanctified as well.

Then **3rd)** He tells us the instrumental cause of our election: God's love. **"In LOVE He predestined us to be adopted as His sons..."** Not on the basis of some foreseen faith on our part. / Not because He saw ahead of time that we

would repent and believe and strive to be godly. / That would be contrary to what the verse says! The cause of our election does not rest upon any foreseen thing in us or done by us. But rather, as Paul states, it finds its sole source and cause in the love of God.

To say otherwise is to turn this verse, and God's grace on its head, and make us the instrumental cause of our own election -- instead of God / His infinite love / and His glorious grace. In fact, if the cause of our election was in us, we would have to change v. 6 to say, **"To the praise of His glorious justice,"** instead of, **"to the praise of His glorious grace."**

If our election is rooted in some good thing foreseen in us / or done by us / it's cause would be us getting what we deserve (or getting justice) / and not grace (which is undeserved favor). **"Grace,"** as Peter Alwinson states, **"is doing good for someone when there is no compelling reason to do so, and every reason not to."** And in terms of salvation, God did that for us.

Which brings us to the Last) thing our passage makes clear: "The glory of God's grace revealed in our election." You see, Paul couldn't do more to assure us that election is the result of something in God and not us. / It's His love (v. 5a). / It's His pleasure (v. 5b) -- that is, He chose and predestined us to be saved, simply because it **"pleased Him"** to do so.

And it's His will (v. 5c) -- that is, God did it for no other reason than that He determined within Himself to do it. Because in doing it, it displayed, **"the glory of His grace,"** which Paul tells us, **"He has FREELY given us in the One He loves."**

And if it's given **"freely"** it means there must be no foreseen in us, or done by us, that compelled him to do so. No foreseen thing in us or done by us that obligated Him in any way. / Nothing that would require Him to do so. We can't even entertain the thought of going there. **For grace that is in any way earned / deserved / or owed to someone as a payment for something they did / is not FREELY given / and therefore, cannot be called GRACE.**

I know it's hard to fathom, but the reason that election and predestination so gloriously display the grace of God, is because there is no explicable reason for

why we are the recipients of it. Grace forces us to concede that God chose us -- undeserving as we are and always will be -- simply because He chose to choose us.

He did it simply because it pleased Him, out of love, to choose us, and displayed above all else, the uncanny riches and breath-taking glory of His grace, to chose people who deserve it least.

And maybe that's where the answer to our question lies: ***If He had chosen us because of something good in us / or something good He knew we would do (like repenting and believing and striving to be good or godly) that would NOT magnify the glorious nature of His grace.***

It would actually diminish the glory of His grace / by making it a reward for doing something right / rather than a gift freely given to the undeserving.

If, as Paul R. Van Gorder once said: "***Grace is God's unfathomable gift of EVERYTHING, for NOTHING, to those who don't deserve ANYTHING,***" then we can be SURE -- that at least one of the reasons He chose us -- was because we didn't deserve it / and were in no way worthy of it.

Hard as it is for our egos to hear it: ***The more unworthy we are, or were, the more it displays the unfathomable riches of His grace in choosing us.***

Knowing I could NEVER have done anything that would make me worthy to be saved / and had actually done everything I could to make myself unworthy -- and yet discovered that God had chosen and predestined me to salvation anyway -- has often left me speechless / and filled my heart with such joy / that it's made me weep in tearful praise.

If all that doesn't cause you stand in greater awe of God / and make His grace look all the more glorious / or cause gratitude and praise to well up in your heart at hearing how much He's graced you, then I fear you either haven't heard what I said / or its truth needs a little more time to sink in!