

God's New Society

Message 1

Destined to be Sons of God

Ephesians 1:1-6

Introduction

What is the first thing you would do if tomorrow you opened a letter from your mother and read that you were not her child – that you had been adopted? Would you feel crushed? confused? angry? excited? Would you laugh or cry? Would you immediately call her to demand an explanation? Would you call her to pour out your feelings? Would you feel that the person you trusted most in the world had betrayed you in the worst possible way? Or would you rejoice in the good news? My friend Bob Weber had to deal with this issue when he was a child. He discovered somehow, probably in the cruel way that children are capable of, that his parents did not give birth to him. Bob was adopted. At first Bob was hurt, but as he thought about his situation in life, he realized how much he had been blessed. He tells how, as a child, he came to the conclusion that he was better off than other children. “My parents chose me because they *wanted* me,” he said. “Other parents were stuck with whatever kids they got.” This story illustrates the heart of tonight’s scripture – that above everything in the universe, God *wanted* us. We’re going to explore these first six verses of Ephesians in some depth, but the glorious heart of this passage is that God wants *us*.

The Author and the Audience

Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians in the customary way by identifying himself and his readers. He tells us that he is “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God”, thus establishing his authority to teach the Ephesians the Christian faith. There is widespread misunderstanding today about the nature of an apostle. It is often observed that the Greek word means simply “sent one”, so an apostle is essentially a missionary. Some people thus conclude that the scriptural teaching about apostles applies to missionaries today. This latter thought misses the special attention given to the twelve apostles in the scripture, but even the word itself indicates more than simply a missionary. Many are sent out to serve, but an apostle packs authority that others lack.

The Greek word *ἀπόστολος* was used for emissaries sent out with the authority to act for the ruler. They had the power to negotiate and conclude treaties, trade agreements, etc. An *ἀπόστολος* did not work out the details of an agreement and then take a draft back to the ruler for his approval. The *ἀπόστολος* could act on his own. When he spoke, his words were the ruler’s words. When he acted, the ruler acted. When he made a treaty, it carried all the authority of the ruler himself. When Paul tells us he is an apostle of Jesus Christ, he is informing us that he has the authority to speak for Jesus Himself. In other words, Jesus spoke directly through Paul. You and I and missionaries are different. Jesus may speak through us, but He does so indirectly. Jesus may use our words to accomplish His will, but Paul’s words *were* Jesus’ words. The obvious importance of this, is that this letter Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus is the exact word of Jesus. As we read this book, Jesus is speaking to us directly.

As if to emphasize the point and remove any ambiguity as to his status and calling, Paul also tells us that his apostleship is by the will of God. You cannot become an apostle of Jesus by trying real hard, or through appointment by the church. God appoints the apostles of Jesus, and in this we see the Trinitarian nature of God’s work. All through this letter the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are shown to work together to secure our salvation.

The readers of this letter were the Christians in the Greek city of Ephesus. I say a Greek city, for so it was, but it was the largest and most prosperous city in the Roman province of Asia Minor – present day Turkey. What is noteworthy is the way Paul addresses these Christians. He calls them saints, “holy ones”. This obviously does not mean saint in the Roman and Orthodox sense. The Roman and Orthodox churches

recognize certain Christians as especially holy, and there is a process for admitting them to a special position in the church. But when this letter was written there was no Pope or Patriarch, and no way to recognize a special class of Christians. Furthermore, the letter addresses all sorts of people, including children. The point here is that all Christians are saints. All Christians are “holy”. This does not mean that all Christians are morally pure. It reaches down to a more basic meaning of the word “holy” and means that all Christians are “set apart”. We are different. Christians are objectively distinct and different from the rest of the world. This is a reality which has powerful ramifications for all our lives, and sets the stage for the rest of this book.

Divine Blessings

After the opening Paul immediately launches into a majestic outpouring of praise to God. It’s as if Paul is so captured with wonder, he cannot find a way to stop, but like a rushing mountain stream his praises tumble out one over another. Verse three tells us the reason behind Paul’s enthusiasm. God “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ.” This sentence is so simple most people miss its meaning. First notice how many blessings are involved. Every blessing. That means that not one is missing. Next, notice when we can expect to receive these blessings. Shall we receive them in heaven? Or when Christ returns? Or ten years from now when we sin less? No! We have *already* received these blessings. The verb “bless” is a simple past tense. God gave us these blessings some time ago, which means that we already have them right now.

Third, notice what kind of blessings these are. They are *spiritual* blessings. This part can be a bit confusing. I think most people read this and think that Paul means to make a distinction between spiritual and physical blessings. Spiritual blessings might be such as salvation, the Holy Spirit, and spiritual gifts. These would be distinct from physical blessings such as food, clothing, and children. This way of thinking comes naturally to the Western mind, and is taught by respected pastors. But I do not think this is what Paul means here. Paul typically uses the word “spiritual” to refer to those things connected to the Holy Spirit – not to non-physical things. In 1 Corinthians 2:44-45 Paul compares the natural, or soulish man to the spiritual man. In context it is easy to see that he is simply distinguishing between those transformed by the Holy Spirit and those not transformed by the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 makes this distinction most clearly.

The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.

Here the word “spiritual” is applied to a very physical thing – a body. A body is not immaterial. It eats and moves and talks. A natural body is what you are born with. A spiritual body is created and given by the Holy Spirit when we are resurrected at Jesus’ return. So when Paul says we have received spiritual blessings, he means that God Himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit, delivered these blessings to us. They are His blessings and come from Him.

Fourth, we receive these blessings in the heavenlies. Some translations have “heavenly places” and others have “heavenly realms” or the like. There is no English word for this. The best way to conceive what Paul has in mind here is to think of another dimension, or an alternate universe. Paul typically speaks this way in his letters, but we tend to miss it because it seems so strange to us. The essential idea here is that we live in an alternate universe simultaneously with the universe we see. This alternate universe is real – so real that it will exist forever after this present universe has been destroyed. It is a future reality, but it is a present reality, too.

Part of our problem is that we tend to have an impoverished view of salvation. We come to Jesus

for help getting through this life. We understand that He died for our sins, and find relief from the guilt of our sin. Some of us shamelessly come to Jesus for eternal fire insurance – the hope of escaping hell. We do not take account of the fact that when Jesus saves us, our world changes forever – or more accurately, we forever enter another world. We are the holy ones who live in the heavenly universe. If you grasp this, you will experience a cataclysmic change in your life.

The main point in all this is that we presently have all the blessings the Spirit has to give. How can this be? Don't we still need God's help? Didn't Jesus tell us to pray for our daily bread? Doesn't He instruct us to pray for our needs? How, then, can you say we already have all the blessings the Spirit has to give? We will develop this at length as we proceed through the book. But for now we will say that our problem is not getting God's blessings, but using them. Some of God's blessings go unused because we do not know they exist. Some go unused because we do not know we have them. Others go unused because they are too costly. Patience is a blessing that is within your reach, but if you grasp it, you will have to use it with unpleasant people. Many of you, really, do not want that blessing. You would rather suffer the consequences of impatience than the burden of bearing with difficult people.

Paul has much to say about using God's gifts. For now, we must worship God for giving us every gift He has. God is a loving Father who has lavished upon us every blessing He has to give.

God's Plan for Us

And now we come to the X-rated part of this passage. If any of you are faint of heart, I urge you to leave now, because I am about to use a dirty word. This is a wicked word which has divided churches, alienated friends, and inflamed evil passions. I would never use such a word – in fact I doubt that most of you have ever heard me use this word – except that it is here in our passage. And I am ornery enough that I will saucily use this word *repeatedly* for that reason. And that word is *predestination!*

Occasionally I am approached by people who hear that I am a Presbyterian and demand to know if I believe in predestination. They heard somewhere that Presbyterians believe in predestination, and they learned some nasty things about it, and they want to know whether I am safe to be around or if they should identify the nearest exit. Usually such people are confused about predestination and what the Bible actually teaches.

Predestination is a biblical term, and anyone who believes the Bible accepts this term. We find it here in our passage in verse five, "having predestined us". As you might guess, it means that God set our destiny in advance. It is closely related to the word "chose" in verse four, "He chose us in Him". There it means that God picked us out to be His. Of course if God chooses you to be His own, that will pretty well determine your destiny.

There it is. You can read for yourself that God chose and predestined His people. It is not hard to understand. But no sooner do we read these verses than people object that this robs man of his free will. "How can man choose God if God chose him first?" they say. My first reply is "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world...having predestined us." You want to argue? Go ask God! You want to pick a fight? Duke it out with God. But if you are patient enough to hear more, my second reply is that these verses do not teach determinism. You are not a puppet. You make real choices in history, and these choices really matter. It is easy to see that God treats man as a free moral agent. Jesus called people to follow Him. Paul preached the gospel to men who listened, repented, and believed – or not. The scripture clearly teaches that man is responsible for his actions. So the fact that God chose us does not make us puppets, not does it absolve us of responsibility for our behavior.

The crux of the problem here is not what the scripture says, but *accepting* what it says. And the

barrier to acceptance is our understanding. We tend to believe only what we can understand – regardless of whether God said it or not. Do you understand the implications of this? This is precisely the attitude that Eve took in the garden. God said she must not eat from one tree. His instructions were simple. But the serpent raised questions. Did God really say that? Why would God forbid this tree? What is wrong with it? And the more Eve thought about it, and the more she looked at the tree, she could not understand why she should not eat its fruit. The Bible tells us she discovered it was beautiful, tasty, and nutritious. She found *no* reason not to eat from that tree. When the serpent challenged her understanding of God's word, she forsook God's word in favor of a position which made more sense to her. This is our constant temptation. But it is evil to hold God's word hostage to our understanding. You must believe what God says whether you understand it or not.

I do not understand how God predestines us, yet still allows us real choice in our behavior. This is a mystery to me and to other scholars. But the fact that I cannot understand or explain it does not make it false. Somehow God chooses us and we are simultaneously responsible for our own actions. I know this because that is what God has shown us in the Bible. There is much more that could be, and has been said about predestination, but for now we will return to the scripture at hand.

God' purpose in choosing us was not simply to throw His weight around. Verse four tells us His goal in choosing us was that we should become holy. Now we have already noted that Paul addresses us as holy. This is the point. God chose us to be separate, different from everyone else. Others live in sin and follow their own desires. We follow Jesus. We exist in a different dimension and live by different standards. Verse five tells us that God's predestination was to make us His sons. Now how can you object to that? In fact, isn't that a marvelous thought? You are God's child! That means you have divine privileges! You are an heir of heaven. You share the wealth of the universe. Your Dad is the awesome Creator and Lord of the whole universe. Isn't that amazing?

But suppose God did not choose you. What would it be like, as an orphan, to choose your parents? We are crazy enough to think that would be pretty neat. You could pick out parents who are wealthy, beautiful, intelligent, athletic, and witty. Or artistic. Or popular. Or anything you want! What a great idea! What a stupid idea! For there is one thing missing which means more than all the others put together and multiplied by millions – love. You would have no way of knowing whether your chosen parents would love you. You might have everything you could want, but your life would be miserable if your parents didn't love you. But as Bob Weber discovered, when you are chosen by your parents, you know they love you.

Theological arguments aside, the most wonderful thought in the world is that God chose us. He did not have to. God was perfectly fulfilled without us. He had friendship and intimacy within the trinity. So why? Why did God chose us? Why, before He even made anything, was His first order of business to pick out His own children? This passage tells us it was for His pleasure. It is not because we were any better than anyone else. It is not because He could look into the future and see that we would be more righteous than others. Actually, some of us were worse than other unbelievers. Some Christians were downright nasty before God got hold of us. No, God chose us simply because it gave Him pleasure. More than that we cannot know.

But why did God chose anyone? God would have been perfectly just in sending us all to hell. Why save anyone? Verse six tells us that God's grand plan of salvation is designed to elicit praise for His glorious grace. From God's visit in the garden until forever, men and angels will never cease praising God for making such a marvelous creature as man, and then, against all common sense, enduring unbelievable suffering to rescue man from his wickedness and stupidity.

Application

This intensely theological passage is also one of the most applicable to daily life. First, as a minimum, we ought to thank God for His incredible blessings. What would you do if your dad gave you a new car? What if a friend introduced you to an amazing person who became the love of your life? What if someone gave you an amazing job? What if you were that man who survived fifteen days on a piece of driftwood in the ocean after the tsunami? Would you thank your rescuer? God has given you everything! Everything! God cannot give you anymore blessings because all is yours. Do you thank Him? Romans 1 tells us that thanklessness is the pivotal sin which plunges people into a life of destruction. This passage should move us to profound thankfulness every day.

Second, we should be moved to worship God for choosing us. He did not have to choose you. You did nothing, back there before anything outside of God existed, to merit God's favor. But God picked you out. It is obvious that He did not pick everyone. This is a deep mystery to us, but we can see that some people are not God's. But you are, if you believe in Jesus. What an awesome gift! It passes understanding. The only possible response is to worship your God.

Finally, we should love our Father. Once you were orphans – filthy, homeless, unwanted, unloved, the scum of the universe. You did not know it. You thought you were a decent person, but that was in comparison to the other filthy scum around you. But then the pure, glorious, awesome Lord came looking for you. He found you, and He loved you. He cleaned you up and made you pure, glorious, and awesome – in a creaturely way. He brought you home to the heavenly universe, and every day He delights in you. This is God, your Father. Do you love Him? Do you love to hear His voice? Do you love to talk to Him? Is your greatest desire each day to imitate Him? Is your greatest joy when you act like Him? If not, why not? Do you not know Him very well? You should. Nothing is so wonderful as knowing your Father.

If you are here tonight and do not know God at all – if you do not believe in Jesus and are not following His teaching, this incredible life is not yours. But it can be. Jesus said, “The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.” (John 6:37) Jesus will not reject you if you come to Him. Tonight ask God to give you the salvation we have been talking about, and He will.

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January 18, 2005