

# One In Christ

## Ephesians 1:1-23

This morning we're getting into our new series in Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, in the Roman province of Asia. Last Sunday evening we spent some time looking at the background to Paul's ministry there, and how this church began.

In Acts 20, Paul said a tearful farewell to the leaders of the Ephesian church, and urged them to arm themselves with the Word of God, and to be watchful against dangers from both outside and inside the church; dangers which would threaten the oneness of God's people.

If you missed that message, hop onto the website where you can listen to it, watch it or read it, and discover something of the relationship between Paul and this church that led to this letter being written.

Let's pray, before we look at chapter 1 together.

*Pray*

### Greeting (v1-2)

The greeting in v1-2 is just that, a greeting. It's a bit different to how we might start a letter, or an email, today. But back then, in the middle of the first century AD, it was common to begin your letter saying who you were, and greeting those you were writing to.

In v1, Paul identifies himself as "*an **apostle** of Christ Jesus by the will of God*". An apostle, in the Bible, is literally "one who is sent" - a delegate, an ambassador. Jesus had twelve apostles. Like them, Paul was sent by Jesus himself. In Acts 9, Jesus calls him, "*a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.*" (Acts 9:15 ESV)

This establishes the authority with which Paul writes the letter. He is writing as an official ambassador of Jesus Christ.

In v2, Paul identifies the recipients of the letter as "*the **saints** who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus*".

Don't get confused when you see the word 'saints' in your Bible. The original word that's translated here as 'saints' simply means "holy ones", i.e. those who are saved by God and set apart for his purposes. All Christians are saints.

Interestingly, in some of the ancient copies we have of this letter, the words "in Ephesus" aren't there. That's because this letter would have been hand-delivered by Tychicus (who we meet in ch6) as a general letter to the churches in Asia. It would have gone first to the church in Ephesus, and then passed on to the other churches in the province who were planted out of the Ephesian church.

Paul also identifies the recipients as those who "*are faithful in Christ Jesus.*" Their faithfulness in Jesus would have been a defining characteristic of the Ephesian Christians in a city that was filled with pagan spirituality and occult practices.

Paul's actual greeting is interesting. It was common in Greek to greet by saying "**grace** to you", and common in Hebrew to greet by saying "shalom" or **peace**. By saying "*grace and peace*", Paul is greeting a multi-ethnic community, who are one in Jesus Christ.

The guts of chapter one really comes in two parts. First, Paul praises God, second Paul prays for the Ephesians (or, what he tells them that he does pray for them).

## The Elephant in the Room - Predestination

As we move into the first major part of chapter one, let's acknowledge the elephant in the room.

Ephesians chapter one is one of those parts of the Bible that addresses *predestination*. This is a Biblical idea which has confused and upsets plenty of people, and plenty of believers, for a variety of reasons.

For those who have never heard of this idea before, or perhaps don't exactly what it means, predestination is a word the Bible uses to describe how God chose, or *elected*, based on his own divine prerogative, before the world began, those who would be saved through Jesus Christ.

The problem with elephants in the room, of course, is that the room is often too small to really stand back and appreciate the whole elephant. If we stand too close to the elephant, so that all we can see is his tail, or a leg, then we're going to think that the elephant is all about his tail, or his leg, and won't see the whole elephant for what it really is.

To really see the elephant, we need to stand right back, even take it out of the room into a bigger space, so we can see it in its totality. This is exactly what we need to do with the idea of predestination in Ephesians chapter one. We can't hope to understand what Paul is saying if we try and isolate the idea and put it under a microscope. It's too big, too majestic for that.

In the original Greek text, Ephesians 1:3-14 is actually a single, long sentence. And that sentence is not about predestination, it's about praise.

And predestination is simply one of many things which fuels Paul's praise. Interesting how his understanding of predestination doesn't upset him, or cause him to doubt, or cause him confusion... *it moves him to praise God.*

I hope that as we move through this chapter we can share some of Paul's adoration for the God who works all things according to his will, and who, in that will, has chosen and saved us.

## **Praise (v3-14)**

Now that we have tipped our hat to the elephant, let's start where Paul starts in v3:

*"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,"*

(Ephesians 1:3 ESV)

This verse is really the heading to everything that follows. As Paul thinks about his brothers and sisters in Christ in Ephesus, and as he reflects on what God has done there in establishing a Christian community, he is amazed by God's limitless generosity, in Christ, to those who believe.

So he begins by praising God for his blessing to himself and the Ephesian Christians (they are all one in Christ despite being separated geographically). He praises God for blessing them with *every spiritual blessing*.

Realise what that means. God has withheld no blessing from those who are in Christ. Can we even understand that? Well, this is what the Christian life is about from the moment of salvation onwards: exploring, discovering and understanding the blessings that God has lavishly poured out on us in Christ.

Paul moves to unpack those blessings in the following verses. He says:

*"...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, that we should be holy and blameless before him."*

(Ephesians 1:3–4 ESV)

Just a note on the odd verse division in v5: because this is all one sentence in the original language, it's not clear whether the "in love" applies to the end of v4, or the beginning of v5 when it's translated into English. It doesn't really change the sense of the passage though.

But let's break this down: God chose believers before the universe's foundation was even laid, to be holy and blameless, in his presence, in relationship with him.

Just a note there about God's choice. Obviously that reminds us of the predestination elephant again. But look carefully. Paul is not making an argument for God's sovereign election of believers. He is saying *to Christians*, "Praise the Lord that he chose us, in Christ, before the world even began. Isn't it amazing that before we even existed in a physical sense, God had his eye and his heart set on us?"

Remember, this is praise, not polemic.

And what did God choose us for?

*"...that we should be holy and blameless before him." (v4)*

God chose us in eternity past that we might be without sin and be in his presence for eternity future. That's what that means. Paul uses two words here with slightly different meanings: "holiness" to describe a life dedicated to God, worthy of him; and "blameless" to describe a life free from guilt or fault.

How did he do this? Look at v5-11, where Paul explains the process of God enacting his sovereign eternal choice of you who have placed your hope in Christ. These verses speak for themselves, but I'd like to comment on them briefly as we move through them. v5 starts simply with:

*"In love..."*

God's motive was simply his limitless, perfect, love. Love for you, unworthy of his love, not recognising or returning his love. In spite of you, he loved you and in love...

*"...he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ,"*

He chose you to be a part of his family, and he did this through Jesus. He made you his child, gave you the family name, erased your old name, your old identity, your old heritage, and gave you a new one, and gave you, as we shall see further down, an inheritance greater than you can ever imagine. He did this...

*"...according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved."*

That word "praise" starts to hint at where this is all going, where the ultimate goal lies. But here we see that God's purpose is to show us grace, "undeserved favour" in Jesus, the beloved Son, so that we might recognise that grace, that sovereign grace and praise him for it. This is exactly what Paul is doing. He goes on, talking about God's beloved Son, Jesus (v7):

*"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses,..."*

Because of what Jesus did on the cross, Christians are forgiven of their sins, past, present and future, *and* he has redeemed us, paid the price that our sins deserved, and transferred us to God's ownership - we belong to him now, we are redeemed. God did this...

*"...according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose,..."*

There's God's grace again, but this time lavishly poured out on his people, no expense spared, no limit to the grace which he extends towards his beloved, redeemed, forgiven, children. And in his grace, he has done more than give us undeserved forgiveness, and undeserved redemption, he has given us undeserved wisdom and insight into what he is doing. It's like the pilot of a large airliner, an Airbus A380, inviting his young son to come up sit in the cockpit and watch as he drives the plane, showing what all the buttons and switches do, letting him see the radar and the maps of where they're going.

But God isn't flying a plane, he is ruling over the universe, and he has allowed us a special seat near him so we can see what he's doing; even though we don't understand all of it.

Paul says that this purpose (v9):

*"...which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, [is] to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."*

God is doing this so that he might unite everything, in the fullness of time, i.e. when time stops and ceases to be, in the Lord Jesus Christ. What this means is that God is going to restore and reorder everything in appropriate submission to himself, in Christ. What began with Jesus, God is going to complete with Jesus.

This is good news for the Christian, because Jesus will be their beloved King, the object of their service and worship for all eternity, ruling over them in love and benevolence forever.

But realise that this is bad news for the unbeliever, who will also be brought under Christ, but not willingly. For them, King Jesus will not be their friend, but their judge, and he will cast them out of his kingdom.

Paul now looks to the future (v11):

*"In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory."*

Here Paul reflects on his own salvation, and that of the other first-generation Christians. And he recognises that God's wise and unchangeable purpose has resulted in these believers being granted an inheritance in Christ's eternal kingdom. The fulfilment of the 'riches' of v7 and the spiritual blessings of v3.

But the purpose isn't an inheritance for us - it's glory for God. And this is the end-goal, God's own glory, revealed in Christ to us, and expressed by us, in Christ, to him, forever.

And the same is true of these Ephesian believers:

*In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory."*

(Ephesians 1:4–14 ESV)

But here Paul adds that, perhaps a little differently to the first generation of believers, the Ephesian Christians received God's Holy Spirit within them at the moment of salvation,

and he serves as a proof, a guarantee, an irrevocable seal that they belong to God in Christ, are his heirs, and will be with him forever. Why? **For the praise of his glory.**

Are you overwhelmed at what Paul has written here? I read this and my head wants to explode. My heart wants to explode!

When I was studying in Bible college, a fellow classmate talked about stuff like this, that it was like trying to drink from a fire-hydrant!

But that's the point. When we realise just what God has done for us in Christ we'll be taken to the limits of our ability to understand and express it. Finally, we'll be left in speechless praise of our God.

This is what the death and resurrection of Jesus for you accomplished. Christian, Jesus took your sin and guilt upon the cross of Calvary, and did away with the your sin. He made you worthy of God's presence, and freed you from guilt.

And God chose you for this unfathomable blessing before the foundation stone of the world was even laid, before you had a chance to do anything to affect your relationship with God, when God knew in advance just how sinful you would be, how you would not seek him out, how you would rebel against him, he chose you, in Christ, to be his. And he made you his child, his heir, and sealed you with his living presence, his Holy Spirit in your life, to mark you out as his own.

It's absolutely awe-inspiring.

And yet we so easily count the name of 'Christian' cheap. We're ashamed of it. We take it off and put it on when we want to.

I want to use an illustration to help us summarise what Paul is saying in these verses. This illustration is not original, you might have even seen it around the internet this last week in a video by Francis Chan. It's also not an adequate illustration for the amazing things Paul is talking about, but it might help us get a little closer to grasping some of this stuff.

Imagine that this rope represents eternity.

We can't see either end of the rope, eternity is beyond our ability to grasp.

Here in the middle, this white bit, is the life of our universe. It begins at this green bit, with Creation.

Now look at this red bit. That's your life. If this were to scale, it would be a lot smaller.

That is your life on this planet, the totality of inhalations of oxygen you will make. It's very small compared to eternity, isn't it?

And yet, God, starting way back here, began with an unchangeable plan in his mind, and unfathomable love in his heart, humanly speaking.

And put his plan in motion through his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, the Word of God.

*In Christ* he created the world.

*In Christ* he reveals himself to the world.

His plan is all *in Christ* - from the earliest prophecies and foreshadowings in the Old Testament, through to his conception, his birth, his life, his teaching, his miracles, his death, his resurrection, his ascension; through to those who then go on to on hope *in him*, place their faith *in him*, find forgiveness of their sins and redemption *in him*, and every spiritual blessing *in him*, and an inheritance beyond imagining *in him*.

And it continues beyond the end of the world that we know, long after ceases to be, when everything will be united *in Christ*, and God will be glorified forever.

And he chose you, the minutest speck on the canvas of history, way back here, to enjoy a privileged part of that eternal plan all the way down on the other side and beyond. I hope that you find that humbling. I hope that you find that awe-inspiring, I hope that find that worthy of praise, just as Paul does.

That's Paul's point in these verses.

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## Predestination Revisited

Let's revisit our elephant for a moment.

I hope you can now see that if we get hung up on predestination, then we have missed the whole point of what Paul is saying here.

As we have said, predestination (or sovereign election, as it's sometimes called), is the Biblical teaching that God chose in eternity past those who would be saved in Christ. It's not the main point of this passage, but it clearly underpins what Paul is praising God for.

And why shouldn't we praise God for it? If God has chosen us in Christ, in love, before the foundation of the world, to enjoy all of this eternal blessing in Christ, why should that not simply fill us with praise?

Of course, the idea of predestination is a hard one to get our heads around, and this is perhaps why the New Testament only talks explicitly about sovereign election and how it applies to those who are already saved. God limits what he reveals about how he works.

There are probably two main areas where we struggle with this idea. The first is the obvious flip side to the sovereign election, that we struggle with idea that God, **by inference, chooses not to save some people.**

This is hard for us especially when some of those may be people we know and love, even who we have prayed for to come know Jesus.

Let's be careful of two mistakes here. The first is to take our own election for granted, and then to not value it. That is a big mistake. The second is to presume that our standards are higher than God's standards.

What I mean is this: it's not unbelievable that God should choose to send some people to hell. What's unbelievable is that God should choose to send some wretched, worthless, undeserving sinners to heaven, make them a part of his family, and grant them an inheritance alongside Jesus himself. That's unbelievable. But praise God that it's true.

You see, the Bible says that every single human being that has ever walked this earth, with the exception of Jesus, is a sinner deserving hell. No matter how good we think they are, no matter how good we think we are, every human being inherits Adam's sin and broken relationship with God. And yet, in love, and for nothing other than for the sake of his own glory, God chooses to save some, and welcome them into his arms.

Do we know who is not predestined? No. But we know that those who hope in Christ have been chosen from the before the foundation of the world. The only time we will know who wasn't chosen by God will be when we don't see them in heaven. And then we will understand why. Until then, it's open season, and there's no reason to stop praying for them or talking about Jesus with them.

**The second area that we struggle is in how much of a role we play in our own salvation.** We find it hard to swallow that we had no hand at all in our salvation. Well, actually that's not true. What I contributed to my salvation was my sin, which gave Jesus something to bear in my place in the cross.

We must be very careful of taking pride on our salvation. Paul says quite clearly in the next chapter:

*“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*

(Ephesians 2:8–9 ESV)

We sometimes talk of “accepting Christ”. The reality is that God *accepted us* on Christ's merits. We were dead in our transgressions and sins, we could accept nothing until God made us alive in Christ. It denies the reality of our depravity to believe that we would have accepted Christ if we had been offered an invitation.

Or sometimes we talk of God's foreknowledge: that predestination simply means that God just knew beforehand who would accept Jesus. On one level, I simply want to say, “Refer back to point 1.”

But on another level, can we really reduce God's sovereign power in election to a kind of “wishful thinking”? That is not God, dear friends. God doesn't exist in the realm of hopes and dreams. He exists in the realm of universal sovereign authority. Furthermore, can I trust a God like that to keep me saved, when at the very end, he's relying on me to make the right choice?

Let's come back to our rope. Do we really think we can put ourselves in a level with God in our salvation, when we exist for this tiny bit, and God has sovereignty over the whole of eternity? Or can we honestly say that we are able to assist God in our salvation, when we struggle to have control over this tiny bit here, and God has absolute control over the whole thing?

Now, my goal this morning is not to convert you to Reformed Predestinationism, or hand you just one more Calvinistic tulip to put in your theologian flower-pot. My hope and prayer is that you realise the the incredible power and love and grace and sovereignty of God, in Christ, that is revealed in *your* salvation, and that you are moved to praise and adoration of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Perhaps an illustration is useful here. You might have heard it before.

Sovereign election is very confusing, especially when we consider how it relates to the invitation of the gospel.

The illustration goes like this: becoming a Christian is like walking through a narrow door. On the front of the door is brass plaque with the words of Jesus from **Matthew 11:28**:

*"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*

(Matthew 11:28 ESV)

But as you go through the door to other side, and it closes behind you, you look back and see another plaque on the back of the door, which can only be seen from this side, with the comforting and reassuring words of **Ephesians 1:5**:

*"In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ..."*

(Ephesians 1:5 ESV)

## Recap:

Let's do a quick recap on v3-14 before we look finally, and briefly, at v15-23:

We can break Paul's praise down into three categories of things that move him to praise: Past, Present and Future.

In the **Past (v3-5)**, God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless, and predestined us for adoption as his own children.

In the **Present (v6-10, 13)**, God has lavishly blessed us with grace, redemption, forgiveness, wisdom and insight, and he has sealed us with his Holy Spirit.

In the **Future (v11-14)**, we will be united fully in Christ forever, and we will acquire possession of our inheritance in him.

## Prayer (v15-23)

We're nearing the end! Are you hanging in there?

In v15-23, Paul tells the Ephesians how he is moved to pray for them. Their faith and their love for their fellow Christians mark them out as having been adopted into God's family in Jesus.

He prays two things.

First he thanks God for them. Secondly, he simply prays that they would get it; that they would understand more and more how amazing all the stuff in v3-14 is, and how amazing their salvation is. What a prayer to pray. Do we ever pray that for our brothers and sisters in Christ?

He prays that they would have a spirit of wisdom and revelation, and knowledge of Jesus, that the eyes of their hearts (a wonderful phrase), would be opened know the hope that they have been called to, and that they might know the riches of their inheritance in Christ, and that they might know the greatness of God's power that he has worked in the lives of those who believe, to bring them to salvation.

And this is where Paul makes an amazing connection. He says that this power is the same power that God

*"...worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."*

(Ephesians 1:20–23 ESV)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an illustration of your own salvation, and a demonstration of God's power to save even you.

Do you see again how everything is "in Christ"? It's all about Jesus. In fact, in these twenty three verses, Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" or a variation thirteen times that I can count. On average, in every second verse he's talking about being in Christ in one way or another.

And he prays that the Ephesian Christians would look to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and see there the revelation of God's power and plan that raised them from death in sin to new life "in Christ".

## **Conclusion: One In Christ**

We've covered a lot of ground this morning. It's an amazing passage.

Quite simply, this chapter calls us to recognise and reflect our oneness in Christ, especially as a body of believers. And that oneness is perhaps best expressed back to God, in our praise and in our prayers.

Do you marvel at your salvation? Do marvel at others' salvation? Do you pray that your fellow Christians would grow a deeper appreciation and understanding of their salvation? And when we sing together, or when we talk together, do we together delight in the greatness of God's eternal plan in Christ, and how he's involved us in that plan?

Shortly, we'll have an opportunity to reflect our oneness in Christ in the fellowship of the Lord's Supper.

Before we do that, I invite you to pray with me.