

A Series on Ephesians: Spiritual Blessings
He Chose Us in Him Before the Creation of the World (Ephesians 1:1-14)
by Kevin Haah



I. Spiritual Blessings

Last week, we started a series on Ephesians. Today, we are going to start a sub-series called “Spiritual Blessings.” We talk a lot about blessings. God has blessed us with a roof over our heads, with family, with friends, with a job, with money, with food, with security, and with education. Sometimes, however, when we are going through rough times—and we are struggling with housing, relational issues, financial issues, finding a job, we wonder if God is blessing us at all. Where are all the blessings that God is blessing other people with? What have you done for me God?

That’s what we’re going to talk about for the next few weeks. In Ephesians 1:3, Paul starts out the letter by saying: **“Praise be to God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”** Then, he breaks out into all of the spiritual blessings that God has bestowed upon us, all the way until the end of verse 14. Verses 3-14 is grammatically one sentence.

Remember, Paul wrote this while he was in prison. He didn’t have freedom, he didn’t have enough to eat, he didn’t have a decent place to sleep, he didn’t have money. He was under a miserable situation. But, he was praising God for his spiritual blessings in the heavenly realms.

He was praising God for the deep blessings we have received, the blessings that transcend other blessings. If we had all the riches of the world, but didn’t have these blessings, it would mean nothing. Paul, in another occasion said, compared to the riches of God in the heavenly realms, our material blessings are nothing.

What we want to do during this short sub-series is to look at the true blessings we have in Christ so that we can be for the praise of his glory.

As you read this passage, I want you to make a chart like this (draw the chart), and on the left column, put all the things that God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit have done and on the right column, what you have done.

Let’s read Ephesians 1:1-3-14

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. [what did he bless us with?] ⁴ For [“for” means this is what he has blessed with] he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he^a predestined us to be adopted as his sons 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 And he^b 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 will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

¹¹ In him we were also chosen,^c 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 hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed [you believe—let’s put this on the right column, finally], 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.

There is a lot of stuff on the left side and only one thing on the right side—your belief. That’s why we give God glory for what he has done. We are going to take this one at a time.

One theme that you can’t help but to see in this passage is that we have been blessed with God choosing us. It’s not us who chose God, it is God who chose us. It’s all over the place.

- He chose us in Christ even before the creation of the world.
- In love, He predestined us
- In accordance with his pleasure and will
- Mystery of His will according to his pleasure, which he purposed in Christ
- Just in case you didn’t get that: he says in verse 11: You were chosen, [what?] having been predestined, [what?] it’s according His plan, [what?] he works out everything in conformity of the purpose of His will.

^a 4,5 Or *sight in love. He*

^b 8,9 Or *us. With all wisdom and understanding, he*

^c Or *were made heirs*

We are going to look at: (1) what it means that God chose us and predestined us; (2) some questions we have about that; and (3) what relevance it has for us now.

II. So, what does it mean that God chose us and predestined us?

I think there are three ways to approach this text.

One: the idea that God chooses people, which necessarily means that God does not choose some other people, is uncomfortable. It does not seem right. How can God do that? People have the freedom of will. Didn't he say that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life? So, this can't be right. This approach, however, forces us to completely ignore all the passages in the Bible that says that God chose us before we chose him.

The second approach that some people have take is that say that God chose those he knew will choose him; I used to take this approach earlier in my walk with Christ. Since God can see the future, he knew who was going to choose him; so, that's who he chose. I used to point Romans 8:29-30:

29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

I used to say that that God predestined people he FOREKNEW would choose him. So, there is no contradiction between God's choosing and our free will. However, when I studied these texts carefully, I came to the conclusion that I was wrong. There are three reasons: (1) When it says that God foreknew, it means that he foreknew his chose before the beginning of the world, just as it says in Ephesians. It is the same order: In Romans, he foreknew and predestined. In Ephesians, he said he chose before the creation of the world and he predestined. (2) in Hebrew, the idea of knowing is not just intellectual but intimately relational. In fact, the Bible uses the language of knowing someone as equivalent to experiencing intimate love with someone. So, to know someone means to love someone; so, foreknowing is the same as foreloving. He loved us before we came into being just because he loved us. (3) there are specific Bible passages that say that God chooses us before we choose him. 1 Corinthians 1:27-30 say:

27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him. 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus [It's pretty clear here which order they come—it is him choosing you, that why you are in Christ], who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

The Bible actually answers this question pretty clearly.

1. God chose you first. Then you chose God. So, this means that you didn't make yourself a Christian, God made you a Christian.

2. The Bible teaches us that without God's sovereign enabling, we do not have the nature to want to submit our lives to God.

- In John 6:44, Jesus says: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him”
- Ephesians 2:1 says: “you were dead in your transgressions and sins.” Dead people can't really do much.
- In various passages, it tells us that we are all in sin and bondage to sin and we don't have the ability to liberate ourselves.
- In Romans 3, it says that everyone is so under sin that no one seeks God. When Adam and Eve sinned, even though they had known perfect fellowship with God before, they didn't seek God. God had to come and seek after them. Our natural selves do not have the ability to seek God. It's like we have these blinders on and no matter what people say, we just can't see it. God needs to take our blinders off first in order for us to see it.

So, the most biblical way to view this passage is that God indeed chose us, he has predestined us, even before the creation of the world, even before we chose him because of his love for us. His love is prior to our love for him. He loved us first. So, his love is unconditional and pure. He loves us just because he loves us. It is not based on deserving of his love.

III. Let me address some questions you might have.

1. I think the biggest issue that people have is that this seems to undermine free will. If God chooses us, we don't really have a free will. No, that's not true. Let me try to explain it in a couple of ways.

One, the Bible does not just teach that God choose us and predestines us, but it also teaches us that we have a free will and we can choose to put our faith in the saving work of Christ or not. It is up to us. For some reason, the Scripture does not seem to think that these two teachings are at odds with each other. For example, in Exodus, there are two phrases that are repeated interchangeably: 10 times, the Bible says that the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and 10 times it says Pharaoh hardened his heart. The Bible teaches both that God is sovereign—that he controls everything—that he chose us AND that we have free will and we face consequences for the decisions we make. This is not just a paradox. It's what we call an antinomy - that is, two truths which go alongside each other but which are seemingly incapable of being reconciled. Maybe another way to put this is both/and. Not one or the other, but both/and. There are several antinomy or both/and that the Scripture teaches.

- We believe that God the Father is God and Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is God, but that there is only one God. We are monotheists. How can you believe that and also believe that God is one? Because the Scripture teaches both/and.
- Do we solve the problem of suffering by focusing on the biblical teaching that evil forces have created pain and suffering the world, which makes God seem like he is not in control? Or do we focus on the teaching that God is sovereign and in control of everything but that he allows suffering for some reason that we don't know. The truth is that the Bible teaches both. It says that God is fully in control; yet, Satan is also causing pain and suffering all around us. It is both/and.

Now many of us may say, "I don't understand that." And in many ways that's not really surprising. If you consider that we are finite creatures with finite minds but God is an infinite God whose wisdom is infinite, it is not at all surprising that we do not understand some of his ways. But in spite of our lack of understanding, we must humbly accept what Scripture teaches.

Another way to look at election vs. free will issue is this. We do have free will but we don't have the desire to choose what is right unless we are enabled. It's just that we don't even want him. That's what the Scripture taught, right? We are dead in sin. We are hostile to God. We don't seek God. The natural human heart does not even want God. Zoologists tell us that lions actually can survive on tofu, but they will never choose it over red meat. They have the freedom to choose, but they will never choose it because it is not in their nature to choose it. Unless God takes our blinders off, we can't even want God.

2. Another problem people have with the doctrine of God's sovereignty and election is that they say that it is unjust. If God has chosen some from before the foundation of the world, does this make God unjust? Paul deals with this in Romans 9:14 when he is talking about the doctrine of election. He writes, **'What then shall we say? Is God unjust?' His answer is this: "Not at all! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy.'**" What he is saying is that salvation for guilty, lost sinners is not a matter of justice. It is a matter of mercy, and mercy by definition is totally unmerited, so that no one can complain if he or she does not receive it.

Let's say because some of you are having a hard time financially, five of you decided to go rob a bank. I confront you and plead with you to not do it. But, you say you are going to do it anyway. On your way out, I decided to knock out a couple of you and tie you down so that you can't go rob the bank. But, three of you end up going to rob the bank and you get caught. Can you blame me for not knocking you out and tying you up? No. It was not a matter of injustice or even fairness. You desire the consequences of your choice.

It's interesting how we are always interested in what happens to other people. I love the story of Peter after the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus tells Peter that Peter was going to end up dying a martyr's death. Then, Peter's first instinct is to ask Jesus: what about John? And I love what Jesus said in response in John 21:22: **"If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"** In other words, it's none of your business. Jesus is saying I will tell you your story, but not the story of others. I will treat them with fairness, with compassion, and love.

3. Some say: well, if God already elected his people, we don't have to evangelize. We don't have to go on mission because God's going to make it happen anyway. Not true. God called us to go and make disciples of all nations. God has not only chosen a people; he has also chosen the means by which he will bring salvation to them. And that means is you and me speaking the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul's experience in Corinth, in Acts 18, is a classic illustration of this. You remember how Paul was discouraged and persecuted and about to give up when there was so much opposition in Corinth? Then God appeared to him in the middle of the night and said to go on speaking. Don't give up in the midst of all the discouragement and difficulties of these circumstances. Go on speaking. Why? "**Because,**" he says, "**I have many people in this city.**" But they hadn't been converted yet. How did God know? He knew because they were the people he had chosen. Paul's great encouragement was that the God who had sent him there had a people that he was going to call through Paul's preaching.

But someone may ask, "How shall I know who is elect and who is not?" Let me give you the answer which Charles Spurgeon gave to his students. He said, "**Let me tell you as politely as possible that that is really none of your business! Your business is to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature by every means. And God's business is to draw to himself those who are his own.**"

Now that is at the heart of evangelism: It is not merely persuading people intellectually or moving them emotionally. The task of evangelism is to be the obedient instrument: in the hands of a sovereign God whose saving power goes forth through us, a weak instrument.

IV. How is this doctrine helpful to us? How is it relevant to us?

1. First, it gets rid of self-hatred. We find here that God loves you because he loves you, without any condition. His loves is pure for you. If he loves you because you are good, you are successful, you are pretty, etc, how can you know that he loves you when you are not so good, not so successful, not so pretty, not so deserving. God's love is beyond anything you can imagine. He loved you even before the creation of the world, and he loved you even before you turned back to him and repented. Remember, the

prodigal son's story, the father, seeing him far off, runs to him. It is before the confession. Instead, the father's arms are around him to make it easier to repent. It is the father's arm, and then there is repentance. He kisses you in order to show you what you have to say. His love is extraordinary. It is his love that enables us to come to him with our sins.

2. Second, we get rid of self-pride. We know that salvation started from God, and ends with God. I had nothing to do with my salvation. That brings us to humility. It wasn't me getting more serious about Bible study that got me the salvation. It wasn't my willingness to go to church or humble myself in front of God that got me the salvation. Fundamentally, I was dead and he raised me up. I am what I am because of his grace upon me. There is no boasting. There is no judgment against others, no matter what.

3. Third, the election of God gives us absolute assurance of our salvation. It gives us security. The Scripture does talk about two ways to see if you're saved. One is by the fruit you are producing. I think this can lead to spiritual depression. Sometimes, you are hot for the LORD, and you feel saved because you see fruits in your life. Sometimes, you are not as hot for the LORD, and you don't feel saved. Instead of basing your assurance of salvation on such subjective things, I think it is much better to base it on the objective reality that God has taken a hold of you and so, he will never let you go. It is not based on your action before or even after you are saved. It is based on his grace and his grace alone. Some of you might be wondering if you are chosen. If you have a desire to seek God, you are chosen. If you want Jesus in your life, you are chosen. If you are drawn to God, you are chosen. You simply respond to his prompting.

4. You have hope for the future because you are predestined to be holy. This means God will never let you go. He is complete the work he started in you. This does not mean you can live anyway you want. Jesus said, "No one can pluck them out of my hand." If someone says, I lost my incentive to live a good life. IF that is the case, fear of punishment was only incentive for you. The incentive in any love relationship is not fear

of being hit or punishment. That's an abusive relationship. If the husband can't hit, I don't have any incentive. Something's wrong. The only incentive is what he has done for us and we see what we can do for him. No one else can take him away. This doctrine is no matter how difficult it gets, you will come back.

Concluding thoughts.