



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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To the Praise of his Glory

Ephesians 1:3-14

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We'll be looking this morning at Ephesians 1:3-14. It never ceases to amaze me the riches that come from simply slowing down as I read the Bible. Over the last several months I've taken multiple occasions to just sit down with Ephesians, to read it slowly, to pay attention, and to be immersed in it. To pay specific attention to Paul's choice of words and his grammar. To notice how his choices of words and phrases bring echoes of the Old Testament into his letter and to meditate on how what Paul says here fits into the great biblical story of Israel's God and his people. As I said last week, in Ephesians Paul gives us the view from the mountaintop. He shows the whole panorama of the great story of redemption.

Verses 3-14 are an invitation into that story. I think a lot of us—especially if you're a theology nerd—a lot of us reading these verses easily lose the forest for the trees. We see words like “election” and “predestined” and they stir up modern controversies over whether or not God chooses us or we choose him; over whether God elects specific people for eternal life or if he also positive elects others for damnation. This is the fuel for heated arguments. And, I suspect, were Paul to hear these arguments he'd ask something like, “Wait? *That's* what you got from what I wrote?” Because I think the thing that Paul wants us to notice here, what he wants to centre us on, is the praise of God in light of that great story. In fact, I'd never noticed before, but in Paul's Greek, this whole section is one long sentence proclaiming the mighty and saving

deeds of God. It's like Paul wanted us to hear one, beautiful, heart-stirring musical chord, or get a single amazing impression from a beautifully painted image, but since words and language don't work like that, since you have to express them one at a time, Paul composed this as one, single rush of words meant to move us to praise. Consider how he begins in verse 3, “Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah.” Blessed be God. It's not meant to just be a factual statement that God is blessed. To really get the sense of it in English it might be better to say, “Let *us* bless God.” Because, Brothers and Sisters, that's Paul's real point here.

Pagans praised their gods. But Jews did something more: they *blessed* the God of Israel. In fact, the word that Paul uses is one that for the Greeks simply meant to speak good of someone, but the Jews gave it a much fuller and deeper meaning to translate their Hebrew words for bless and blessing. To understand this takes us all the way back to the beginning of the story. When God created the world and filled it with life, he blessed that life that it might be fruitful, that it might multiply, and that it might fill the earth. The fish, the birds, and eventually the man and the woman. God blessed them. And in the Hebrew worldview, it was God's blessing that brought human flourishing and that provided all that is good in creation. And so, in return, the Jews blessed God. Obviously, human beings don't have the ability to grant the goodness and flourishing with our blessings that God can with his, and so to bless God took the form of praise and thanksgiving for his goodness, for his faithfulness, and most of all for his mighty and saving deeds in history. And all that is summed up in those words, “blessed be God”. To this day, Jewish prayer begins with the words *Barukh Attah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam*, Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe. But then when we unpack it, what we find is that at the heart of blessing God is telling his story, not just to rehearse

for ourselves his greatness, but to proclaim it to everyone else. Read through the Old Testament and you see God's people praising him first and foremost by telling the story of his mighty deeds: sometimes what he'd done for the person giving the praise, but more often for his creation and his providence, and most of all for his recuse of Israel from their Egyptian slavery. The Exodus was *the* great act of God in history that showed his blessing and for which his people blessed him in return.

When the people of Israel gathered together, they rehearsed what God had done, whether it was Israelites in the days of David, sitting around campfires and hearing those stories faithfully passed down from generation to generation, or the people of Paul's day reading the scriptures in the synagogue, they told the mighty deeds of God as an act of praise. Brothers and Sisters, the same goes for us. I suspect a lot of us hardly ever think of it this way. We read the Bible for knowledge. We read the Bible to win arguments. We read the Bible because we know it's a good thing to do or because we hope God will speak to us. But, first and foremost, we read the Bible—in public worship and in private worship—to rehearse the mighty and saving deeds of God as an act of praise and as a call to praise. Just read the psalms and see how they proclaim the great story as an act of praise and a means of blessing God. The modern trend in worship, I think, gets this precisely backward. We begin our services with praise—I often hear people say it's to get us in the right frame of mind—and then we hear scripture, then we receive the Lord's Supper. The biblical model is the other way round: To read and to hear scripture is the first act of praise, everything else follows in response. Thomas Cranmer, the architect of our liturgy, understood this. In Morning and Evening Prayer, we first hear the scriptures, and then we sing the canticles (which are themselves mostly scripture). At the Communion, we hear the scriptures, we receive the

Lord's Supper, and after all that, we sing the *Gloria* in praise and thanksgiving. So this is what Paul's getting at in verse 3: "Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah! He has blessed us in the Messiah with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms."

But why? Because, in Jesus, God has already blessed us. With what? With every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms. That means, with the life of the Spirit, that foretaste of the age to come and the day when we, ourselves, will be resurrected to life with God just as Jesus has been. Because, in Jesus and the Spirit, God has blessed us by making us heaven-on-earth people. Through Jesus and the Spirit, God has begun the work of bringing heaven and earth, God and man, separated by sin, back together—*in us*.

But Paul doesn't just leave it at that. He tells the Jesus story, the church story, but he does it in a way that echoes the bigger story all the way back to creation. He never mentions Adam or Abraham, the Exodus or the Exile. Instead, he describes what God has done for us in the Messiah using the words and phrases that Israel typically used to tell those stories.

Now, because this whole passage is one long sentence and because it's clear Paul wants us to hear it sort of like a music chord, let me read through the whole thing in one go starting with verse 4. Here's what he writes: "He chose us in him before the world was made, so as to be holy and without blemish before him. In love, he foreordained us for himself, to be adopted as sons [and daughters] through Jesus the Messiah, according to the purpose of his will. So that the glory of his grace, the grace he poured out on us in his beloved one, might receive its due praise. In [the Messiah], through his blood, we have deliverance—the forgiveness of sins, through the riches of his grace, which he has lavished on us. With all

wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his purpose, just he wanted it to be and set it forward in him as a blueprint for when the time was ripe. His plan was to sum up the whole cosmos in the Messiah, everything in heaven and on earth in him. In him we have received the inheritance. We were foreordained to this, according to the intention of the one who does all things in accordance with the counsel of his purpose. This was so that we, we who first hoped in the Messiah, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you too, who heard the word of truth, the good news of your salvation, and believed it—in him you were marked out with the Spirit of promise, the Holy One. The Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance, until the time when the people who are God's special possession are finally reclaimed and freed. This, too, is for the praise of his glory."

So Paul begins with the language of having been chosen. It's almost like he's rehearsing the Passover story. Being chosen resonated with the Jews. Their father, Abrahah, had been chosen and called from the paganism of Ur. In the Exodus, the Lord had declared Israel to be his chosen. Paul wants that mighty act of God's goodness and mercy to echo into our story—to hear the Lord declare to Pharaoh that Israel was his beloved, his firstborn son. Paul writes in verse 5 that we've been marked out as sons and daughters of the Father because of his love for us—love poured out in Jesus, love poured out at the cross as he shed his blood—blood that has marked us out as holy and washed us clean of sin. Blood that has united us with Jesus, his son, and made us his children by adoption.

And the language of deliverance and redemption in verse 7. This is what Paul's getting at. Again, his choice of words is important. The word he uses is the one used most often in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to the deliverance, the redemption of his people from Egypt.

It's a word that often carries the idea of buying a slave so that he can be set free and in the Bible it very often and more specifically recalls the image of Israel being redeemed from Pharaoh's slave market and being set free by God—a freedom through which Israel was meant to proclaim and to live out God's amazing and redeeming grace. But there's also an echo of Israel's long-hoped for deliverance from exile—an exile the people were still living out when Jesus was born. And, unlike the Exodus, the exile was the result of Israel's sins. And so the prophets, like Isaiah, had spoken of a new exodus, a deliverance from exile, but this time round it would be an exodus that had to address, that had to deal with Israel's sins.

And that's why Paul writes of blood. The blood of the Passover lamb was for the purification of the people. Somehow blood would have to be shed to purify Israel and to and the long exile, so they could once again live in his holy presence and so that they could once again be fit to serve his purpose as priests and stewards of his temple. This is why Jesus so often did things that echoed the Passover theme. He was calling to mind this doubled tradition: The first exodus, deliverance from slavery, but also the promised and hoped-for second exodus in which God would somehow redeem his people from their sins and from the effects of that sin. So when Paul, in verses 7 and 8, writes of the blood through which we have deliverance and the forgiveness of sins, when he writes of the riches of God's grace and how it's been lavished so richly on us, he wants us to see these layers of the great story: of creation, of exodus, of exile, of forgiveness, of redemption. He wants us to see the glorious cross of Jesus, but he also wants us to see how the whole story has been one act after another, one great drama unfolding through history that shows us who God is, that reveals his grace and mercy, his goodness and faithfulness that then find their full fruit, that

explode in one great act of glory in the events of the new exodus. All these notes coming together a beautiful, harmonious chord.

Why? Because Paul knew that without this, we're prone to forgetting our vocation, just as Israel had. That's why Paul goes on to talk about God making known the secret of his purpose—the great mystery—with all wisdom and insight. In Paul's day the Jews—many of them at any rate—associated the idea of *torah*—of God's law—with the idea of God's divine wisdom. This fusion of *torah* and wisdom was God's great design for life and for flourishing and not just that, but for life and flourishing that would cause his people to give him glory. Brothers and Sisters, the gospel isn't just the good news that we've been forgiven and promised eternal life. The gospel is also about vocation—a vocation that goes all the way back to Israel—even to Adam and Eve. It's about being freed from our bondage to sin and death so that we might live to the glory of God as heaven-on-earth people, as the firstfruits of his new creation, as pockets of the age to come in the here and now.

And Paul reminds us in verse 10 that this was God's plan, his blueprint all along, one that would be fulfilled in the "fullness of time"—when the time was right. None of it was an accident. What we so often take in as disconnected Bible stories, was all along one great drama, setting the scene, establishing the plot, so that at the cross and the empty tomb, God could reveal his glory by leading his people in a new exodus. As Paul puts it here, the plan was to sum up the whole cosmos in the Messiah—*everything* in heaven and on earth in him. Restoring the creation we see in Genesis, where heaven and earth and God and man were one. Bringing to fruition the image evoked by the tabernacle at the end of Exodus: of God once gain dwelling in the midst of his redeemed people. That image at

the end of Exodus in which the people complete the construction of the tabernacle and the *shekinah*, the great cloud of God's glory, descends to fill it is one of the most powerful images in all of scripture—looking back to how things are supposed to be and looking forward to a day when human beings really are fully restored to live in God's presence—no veil, no sacrifices, just life in his awesome presence. This is what Paul describes as an act of praise, the climax of the great story, a new exodus, a Jesus-shaped Passover—all now to be at the heart of Christian praise.

But God's presence entering the tabernacle wasn't the end of the story. Remember, once God had set apart his people and made them holy and taken up his presence in their midst, they were ready for him to lead them into the promised land—to receive the inheritance that he had promised to Abraham. And in verses 11-14 Paul shows us how life in Jesus and the Spirit is the realisation of what that was pointing to all along. Psalm 2, for example, was pointing this way all along. That's the psalm where God says, "You are my son and today I have begotten you. Ask of me and I will make the *nations* your heritage and the *ends of the earth* your inheritance." The promise land and the promise of it was always pointing to something greater—to God's claim on all of creation, on all the nations, on all the peoples. The story proclaims: someday the entire earth will be God's holy land.

And here in Ephesians, Paul is saying that in Jesus and the Spirit, God has now given us—given those who are in the Messiah—this inheritance. "Everything belongs to you," he says in First Corinthians. And here he says that the gift of the Holy Spirit, the indwelling, the tabernacling presence of God in us is the earnest, the down payment, the guarantee of the full promised inheritance. Sometimes it seems like we think of the Holy Spirit in every way except for the very thing

Paul tells us over and over that he represents. Brothers and Sisters, the gift of the Spirit is the guarantee that what Jesus began when he rose from the grave, he will surely one day finish. It's the guarantee that God's work of renewal and new creation in Jesus will, without a doubt, put a final end to sin, to sorrow, to corruption, to decay, and even to death itself. It is the guarantee that the reunion of God and man that began when God took up his residence in the tabernacle, and that went a step further at Pentecost when he took up his residence in his people, will be fulfilled in the ultimate tabernacle of a new heaven and earth. It's the guarantee that that the fellowship between God and human beings in the garden at the very beginning of the story will also be the end.

It's easy to forget. As Paul writes in Romans, the whole world is groaning under the weight of our mismanagement. We still live with the effects of sin and corruption, of decay and death. Like the Israelites when the spies returned from Canaan and warned that there were giants in the land and heavily fortified cities. They gave up. They became overwhelmed. They forgot the promise. They begged Moses to take them back to Egypt. The things they feared were no joke. But they forgot that the God who was with them is the God who will one day dill the whole earth with his glory. The tabernacle—God's presence with them—was meant to remind them of that truth and that inheritance. And, Brothers and Sisters, the Spirit in us serves the same function. In him we have the full title deed, even if we don't yet have the whole earth. But that title deed, that earnest, that guarantee has been given to us by the Father to empower us to go out as his gospel people—to be heaven on earth, to bring his presence into the darkness, to challenge the corrupted principalities and powers of the old age, and to bring the light and life of new creation into the old. And

all, Paul finishes, the final notes in the chord, “is for the praise of his glory”.

Brothers and Sisters, to live in assurance and hope of God’s promise of life is to live a life of praise. It’s to live a life that blesses God and that makes his glory known in the earth. That means that if we want to know what the life of the Christian and what the life of the church should look like, maybe we should work backward from that goal. We should be asking ourselves what it is that we can do that makes God’s glory known. Asking ourselves what we can do that shows the world our sure and certain hope in the inheritance—the new creation—in which we live. Not running back to Egypt in fear, but ready to march around Jericho and to blow our gospel trumpets and trust God to do what he’s promised. I think if we work backwards from the goal of filling the earth with the knowledge of the glory of God, it becomes a lot easier to ask whether what we do, what we value, what we invest in, how we treat others displays our hope in God’s kingdom to the world around us. So, Brothers and Sisters, let us bless God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah. Let our lives be one great shout of praise. Rehearse and proclaim the great story of redemption that proclaims his glory. And let this Passover-shaped, this cross-shaped, story of redemption and renewal transform you so that you—that we all—might live for the purpose of filling the earth with the knowledge of the glory of God—to the praise of his glory.

Let’s pray: Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah, through whose blood you have forgiven our sins, made us sons and daughters by adoption, and brought us into the great drama of your people, shape us, we pray, with your story. Fill us with faith and assurance in the knowledge that, having plunged us into your Spirit, you have given us assurance of the promised inheritance that we might live faithfully in hope and to the praise of your glory. Amen.