

“THE MYSTERY OF GOD’S WILL”

Studies in Ephesians – Living Worthy of Who We Are – I

Ephesians 1:1-14 (p. 1133)

Some years ago a tour group from this church stood in the dungeon carved out of the limestone beneath an ancient house in the old city of Jerusalem – a house that had been recently identified as quite possibly belonging to Caiaphas, the high priest to whose house the soldiers had taken Jesus after his arrest in Gethsemane. While standing there, I asked Jess Heller to read Psalm 55 and for all of us to picture Jesus reciting it aloud. We listened as he read these words:

“My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught at the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked, for they bring down suffering upon me and revile me in their anger...” Then I reminded them of how Peter had stood in the courtyard and denied knowing his dearest friend. Jess went on: *“If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it... but it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship...”* Jess told me later that, having had that experience, those words took on altogether new meaning for him.

In the same way, scriptures that we may have studied in the past will take on new meaning in light of our current experiences. You and I have had a lot to deal with together in recent months. And it struck me that, even though we preached our way through Ephesians just three and a half years ago, those same old words can offer us new insight and new direction in light of what we have been going through lately. In any case, I feel it is time to take a fresh look at this timeless letter. So today we begin our reflections on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians – and to us.

But rather than doing a verse-by-verse exposition as we may have done in the past, this time I want us to look at some major themes that Paul deals with, and see how they apply to where we are right now and where we are headed as a church. (If you want a detailed exposition of the letter, you can hardly do better than Ernie Ettlich’s class going on each Sunday morning.) Now – to our text for today.

Following his signature opening, *χαρις υμιν και ειρηνη*, “grace to you and peace” (a clear sign of Paul’s authorship) he launches into a remarkable hymn of praise to God that goes from verse 3 through verse 14. Now, suppose I told you that my next three years of sermons would be based on Ephesians chapter 1, verses 3 through 14. You might think that I had just slipped over the edge. Yet if you examine those verses closely you will discover, as commentators have pointed out, that Paul crammed into those few verses every significant topic of theology.

Notice what Paul deals with here: the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, divine predestination, redemption through Jesus' sacrificial death, the forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit's seal in baptism, salvation by grace alone, the doctrines of creation and providence, eschatology, faith, sanctification, the proclamation of the gospel. It's all there. Flesh out all of the topics in verses 3 through 14 and you've got a pretty good three-year seminary curriculum.

But what I want you to see this time through is that, as Paul lays out all these great theological themes, you discover that we humans play a distinctly passive role. God is the main character and is the subject of every active verb. What's more, in the Greek those verbs are all in the past-perfect tense. That is, these things are already settled and done. So Paul says that God has blessed us; he chose us; he predestined us; he has lavished grace on us; he made known to us his will; he has redeemed us.

In contrast, our part is described almost exclusively in the passive voice. We were chosen; we were predestined; we were marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. About the only active part Paul attributes to us comes in verse 13 where he says that we believed the gospel. But for us to believe something it had to be presented to us. So even at our most active in Ephesians 1, Paul reminds us that we are still on the receiving end of everything that God alone has provided.

When it comes to the ways in which God loves us and provides for us and saves us, it is clear that we are part of something far bigger than ourselves and to which we contribute next to nothing. And the reason why Paul put it that way is all wrapped up in a phrase you find recurring nine times in our lesson today. Time and time again in verses 3 to 14 Paul reminds us that all of this divine activity of choosing, predestining, lavishing, blessing, giving and revealing all happens "in Christ." Nine times Paul uses the prepositional phrase, "in Christ – in him – in the One – in whom." The reason we humans appear so passive here is because everything we require, all that that we have received, and all that we will ever need, has already been provided for us in Christ.

What does that mean? It means that everything that is wrong with this world will be set right in Christ. It means that anything broken in this life will be fixed in Christ. It means that whatever ails us will find its healing in Jesus. It means that, in ways difficult to grasp, Christ has in himself all the necessary power and desire to forgive sin, to defeat evil, and to offer the grace that every one of us needs to have a loving relationship with the God who created us.

In Paul's way of looking at the universe, Christ Jesus is more than a person. When Paul talks about being "in Christ" you almost have the sense of Christ being a cosmic place, a spiritual location such that, if you are "in Christ," that is, within the sphere of his influence, you're home safe; you're covered with a grace that nobody can ever take from you.

Now, what does this mean for Westminster Church? It means that, as long as we are “in Christ,” we have nothing to fear. It means that, if God has determined that this church is going to thrive, then nobody, including Satan, is going to be able to stop it from happening. It means that a church that is committed to living out its identity in Christ can have its money stolen and lost and yet that church not only survives, it flourishes. It also means that the one who has stolen the money can find forgiveness and healing in Christ.

Since God has predestined us to be adopted as his children through Christ, and since God has invested all authority in Christ, we have an obligation to behave accordingly. Our mission here at Westminster is *inspiring committed Christians to grow in the wisdom of God’s Word and to become living examples of Christ’s love for the world*. What does it mean to “grow in the wisdom of God’s Word?” It means that when God’s Word tells us that he has our back, that we are covered, that nothing can happen to us that is beyond God’s ability and willingness to use for good, then wisdom dictates that we had better act like it’s true.

The world is going to tell us that we should respond to crises not by looking to God’s Word for wisdom, but by wholesale restructuring. There are those who would have you believe that, when a church’s trust is broken, we should take our direction from the business world. Not only should those who are guilty of violating that trust be prosecuted, but the staff and all those in positions of authority should be fired. It is not uncommon in the restructuring of a business faced with financial loss to have the incumbent staff replaced – beginning at the top.

So let me speak candidly. It is clear that the elders of this church, those who bear fiduciary responsibility for this corporation, have failed to execute their responsibility over the past several years. They allowed the theft of funds to go on unchecked. As moderator of session I bear my share of culpability. But in my humble but correct opinion, it would serve no good purpose to replace the current session. As to the current office staff – if a change is in order to make the operation more efficient and helpful, that is worth considering. But to replace the office staff because of their coincidental association with someone who stole money from the church is not only unconscionable, it is the kind of collateral damage that I would defy anyone to justify with scripture. And one last thought on the matter. If I believed that my resignation would benefit this church, I would be out of here in a New York heartbeat.

But I’m not leaving; nor will I countenance any unjustifiable firing of staff, nor replacement of church officers. And I’ll tell you why. It is not because I’m stubborn, and it is not because we’re all particularly deserving of it. It’s because the way the world would have us deal with human weakness is diametrically opposed to what the Bible teaches us. It’s true, we need to be wise to the ways of

the world and prudent in our conduct of the business of the church. Yes, Jesus expects us to be as sharp as snakes and as harmless as doves. And yes, we need to accept responsibility for our own sins and failures, just as we must hold our brothers and sisters accountable for the consequences of theirs, even as we forgive them.

But as Christians we are not only saved by grace alone; that same grace had better set the tone for the rest of life – otherwise it's not grace. All of our interactions with each other, particularly within the body of Christ, are shaped by the fact that the only reason you or I have any business considering ourselves to be God's children is because every last one of us is God's child only by adoption. So if we do dwell right now in Christ, just as surely as we are right now inside this building, then we are there by the grace of God and nothing else.

In verse 9 Paul says that God “made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure.” Do you want to know the mystery of God's will? It is grounded in the fact that God's fierce, fathomless power is exceeded only by his passionate love for us. It was God's pleasure to invest his Son with the full wealth and strength that funds and supports the known universe and more. But the deeper secret of life is found in our passive posture in Ephesians chapter 1, verses 3 through 14. The mystery of God's will is that, no matter what life may throw at us, all we need to tap into God's limitless grace and strength is to believe that what he says is true. And with nothing more than that childlike ability to trust our Father's word, we can live well – now and forever – in Christ. Amen?

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