

EPHESIANS CHAPTER 1: GOD'S GLORIOUS FAVOR

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The first time I really sat down and read Paul's letter to the Ephesians, I was really moved by the opening hymn of praise; it's just some of the most beautiful and uplifting language in the Bible. Let's walk through it...

v. 2: *Praised be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has bestowed on us in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavens!*

The first verb to appear is *praise* – specifically, may God be praised! For he is the source of our blessings, in his Son Jesus Christ. Some blessings? No! We believers have received every spiritual blessing; we just need to own them and exercise them. I'll say more on praise and the Holy Spirit when we get to verse 14...

v. 3-6: *God chose us in him before the world began, to be holy and blameless in his sight, to be full of love; he likewise predestined us through Christ Jesus to be his adopted sons – such was his will and pleasure – that all might praise the glorious favor he has bestowed on us in his beloved.*

So God is the initiator and power behind our life and salvation. Our spiritual adoption is not “plan B”; rather, it was “predestined.” The goal of God's choosing us is that we become holy and free of all guilt. “Holy” means *separated from the secular* (especially from all evil) and *dedicated to God*.ⁱ Our status – as a result of God's choice and plan – is that of “adopted sons” and not mere slaves or hired servants. Note the word son: in Paul's culture, that meant a child who inherits all the Father has – including his joy – whether we happen to be male or female.

v. 7-10: *It is in Christ and through his blood that we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so immeasurably generous is God's favor to us. God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery, the plan he was pleased to decree in Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time: namely, to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's headship.*

That's a tall order. Bring everything under Christ's headship??? We could easily list the things out there in the world that are not yet under his headship. But we cannot control the workings of the world. What is not yet under Christ's headship in ourselves? Are we making godly choices? Are our thoughts governed by Christ, or by our disordered passions? Sure, thoughts and feelings enter our souls that we did not ask for. But how do we respond to them? By letting them bully us, or by standing firm? How about what we do with our leisure time? Do we indulge some private obsession, or do we step out of ourselves into an activity that builds community? Are we watching a show or movie just because it's “riveting” – even if it *darkens our mind and soul* – or are we exercising intentionality in our choice of what to watch? Is our generosity rigidly limited by a fixed percentage, or are we open to being asked to give more?

v. 11-14: *In him we were chosen; for in the decree of God, who administers everything according to his will and counsel, we were predestined to praise his glory by being the first to hope in Christ. In him you too were chosen; when you heard the glad tidings of salvation, the word of truth, and believed in it, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit who had been promised. He is the pledge of our inheritance, the first payment against the full redemption of a people God has made his own, to praise his glory.*

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God has made us his own...why? *To praise his glory. We were made for that.* But wait – weren't we made for "the pursuit of happiness"? Well, as Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "Happiness is not a goal; it is a by-product." When we praise God, we too can enjoy his glory. There is a joyfulness in praising someone or something, even someone or something less than God. When our praise *is* directed to God, the creator and ruler of the universe, so much the better.

Christian author Merlin Carothers had a lot of people come to him with their problems while he was a military chaplain. He always challenged people to praise God for the very problem they were facing – not because God intentionally willed evil, but because *God was working it for their good.* His books are full of testimonies of people who had prayed in vain for God to change some situation. After accepting his advice to praise God for who he is and for the situation he had allowed, many reported that the situation itself changed dramatically for the better.

Carothers shares a story of a man who had asked God to change his father's alcoholic behavior for 30 years without success. After hearing Carothers speak, he decided to thank God for his father's condition and praise the Lord that it was part of God's plan for his father's life. Within weeks, the man's father admitted his drinking problem, turned to Jesus Christ for help, and was completely healed.

Still, Carothers cautions us that praise is not a magic formula to get results. If we start thinking that way, we are not really praising God, are we?. He says,

"Praise is based on an acceptance of the present as part of God's loving, perfect will for us...We praise God, not for what we expect will happen in or around us, but we praise Him for who He is and where and how we are *right now.*"ⁱⁱ

Does anyone get so caught up in doing practical things that it becomes an obsession or compulsion? I do! I can spend days going over the pros & cons of a major purchase. These verses remind me just how crucial praise and thanksgiving are in the Christian life, in order to orient our minds and hearts toward God and the things of heaven. In the Jesuit high school I attended, I had a math teacher, Mr. Serpe, who always wrote the letters "AMDG" in the margin of his tests. AMDG stands for "Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam" (To the greater glory of God) – the motto of the Jesuit order. Mr. Serpe saw all that he did as being for the greater glory of God – and he wanted us to see our own deeds in the same way.

And what about the role of the Holy Spirit? It is he who empowers us to give praise, whether through our native tongue or an angelic tongue. According to scripture scholar D. J. Leahy, these verses characterize the Holy Spirit as "the *seal* stamped on our souls at Baptism as the mark of ownership," and "the *pledge*...of the blessed life paid in full in Heaven."ⁱⁱⁱ So the joy of praise begins in part now, and reaches its fullness in heaven!

Now Paul transitions to a petition for the church.

v. 17-19a: *May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, grant you a spirit of wisdom and insight to know him clearly. May he enlighten your innermost vision ["the eyes of your heart" in the revised edition] that you may know the great hope to which he has called you, the wealth of his glorious heritage to be distributed among the members of the church, and the immeasurable scope of his power in us who believe.*

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Paul prays that we come to know the Father, through the Holy Spirit who reveals him to us. Fr. Francis Martin explains that this “heart” is “the spiritual organ which is at the very, very depth of your personality, where you relate directly to God.”^{iv} But that heart has to be “cleaned up” by the forgiveness of sins. Then we can get a glimpse of his plan for us.

v. 19b-23: *It is like the strength he showed in raising Christ from the dead and seating him above every principality, power, virtue, and domination, and every name that can be given in this age or in the age to come. He has put all things under Christ's feet and has made him, thus exalted, head of the church, which is his body: the fullness of him who fills the universe in all its parts.*

The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us, actually changing us. This understanding gives us hope. Does anyone here need an ounce of hope when they fail? I do! Winston Churchill once said, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.”^v But Paul reminds us that our destination depends not on our own power but on God's. It is about victory in Christ!

To wrap things up:

- God is the initiator and power behind our life and salvation.
- The goal of God's choosing us is that we become holy, free of all guilt, and filled with love.
- God's plan is to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's headship.
- We were made to praise God's glory.
- The Holy Spirit reveals the Father to us, and works within us to bring us victory in Christ.

Questions for consideration:

1. How does understanding what God has done affect my relationship with him and give me hope, even when I fail?
2. How can I praise God, even in painful or difficult circumstances?
3. What power does God want me to experience in my life?
4. Do I recognize Christ in my brothers & sisters?
5. What can I do to foster unity in the Body of Christ?

Scriptural quotations are taken from the New American Bible (original version) unless noted otherwise.

ⁱ J. A. Hardon, *Pocket Catholic Dictionary*. 1985: Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company.

ⁱⁱ M. Carothers, *Power in Praise*. Escondido, CA, 1972: Merlin Carothers. (Chapter 1)

ⁱⁱⁱ D. J. Leahy, “The Epistle to the Ephesians,” *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*. London, 1953: Thomas Nelson and Sons.

^{iv} F. Martin, video reflections on cycle A readings for the Feast of the Ascension, 2011, <https://www.thewordproclaimed.org/priests-only-sidebar/36-sunday-scripture/81-cycle-a-scripture-lenteaster>.

^v <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/3270-success-is-not-final-failure-is-not-fatal-it-is>.