

Introduction

Over this past summer and early Fall we had our “Beyond Labels” sermon series in which we looked at common labels from Christian history and tried to look beyond them to something far greater, and far deeper. Labels are useful. When you’re grocery shopping, for example, it’s helpful to know what’s in the package before you put it in your cart. Labels are a helpful shortcut. They can also feed our laziness and unwillingness to think.

I’m going to share a story about the 2016 presidential campaign but please do not hear in this an endorsement or a denouncement of anyone. Do not hear me saying that all of a candidate’s supporters are a certain way or anything of the sort. Hear the point of the story: people look for labels as a shortcut to having to think. Labels enable us to be reactionary, whether positively or negatively. That’s the entire point of this illustration so don’t hear anything beyond this. If you hear anything other than people look for labels as a shortcut to having to think, you haven’t heard my point.

In 2016 Jimmy Kimmel had a segment on his show called “Your Vote Counts”. In this segment he had a guy interviewing people who claimed to support Hilary Clinton. When they said they were planning to vote for her he asked what they thought about her proposed tax plan, only he told them things from the tax plan proposed by Donald Trump. For example, he asked one man who said he supported Clinton if he supported “her” plan to cut the corporate tax rate from 35% to just 15%. Again, this was Donald Trump’s plan but the interviewer said it was her plan. The man said that he did, in fact, support *her* plan to cut the corporate tax rate. It was quite comical when he revealed they were actually agreeing with Donald Trump’s proposals.

Jimmy Kimmel said it seems to him that most people pick a candidate and “just go along with whatever that candidate says”. In other words, most people pick a party and then just agree because a candidate’s positions have a certain label. They don’t support the candidate’s positions so much as they support the label attached to the candidate’s positions.

This is how labels work. I’ve seen this first hand when interacting with folk I don’t know well. Rather than try to understand your particular position, they’re trying to figure out if you’re liberal or conservative. Only when they can discern the label are they able to decide if they agree or disagree with what you’re saying.

The truth is when it comes to theological debates we often look for the labels. From the very beginning of New City I’ve tried to avoid certain theological buzz words in my preaching because they can function as labels and could cause a person to see a text a certain way that comports with the label rather than seeing what the text actually says. This is why I was able to preach through the entire book of Revelation without using the word “millennium”—even in chapter 20.

“Millennium”, or more accurately, “millennial” can be a theological buzz word—a label. Many have been taught to look for the label and react—positively or negatively—to that word. In this case they’re look for a prefix: *amillennial* or *premillennial* or even

postmillennial. If those words don't mean much to you, you are hashtag-blessed-and-highly-favored.

This morning we're going on an excursus. Rather than look at our text as a whole we will take a more focused look at something in the text. There are words that can be used as labels and of all the labels in Protestant church history, these labels can be some of the most passionately argued labels of them all. I'm not even going to tell you what the labels are; if you know, you know and if you don't, you're also hashtag-blessed-and-highly-favored.

Let me add before we get into the text something I've said before. Sometimes saying what Scripture *says* is not the same as meaning what Scripture *means*. We saw this in Joshua. God told the Israelites to put the Canaanites to the sword—man, woman, and child, and they did so. God also told them that after they put the Canaanites to the sword—man, woman, and child—they were not to marry any of them. Either God was forbidding them to marry corpses or when God said to put them to sword, he was using Ancient Near Eastern warfare rhetoric and very few people actually died. Saying what Scripture *says* is not always the same as meaning what Scripture *means*.

That being said, not saying what Scripture says almost always is not meaning what Scripture means. If you cannot use the words Scripture uses to describe something, there's a good chance you're not meaning what Scripture means about that thing. With that, let's look at Ephesians 1.

Eph 1:3 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, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

Ephesians 1:3–6

The Subject of the Verbs

One thing that ought to stand out in our minds in this text is the subject of the verbs. God is the one acting throughout this entire chapter. Paul lays out the basis for our salvation and every single aspect of it is something God has done. Even the very idea of our salvation is God's idea. Inherent in the concept of salvation is that it is one-sided. If you get yourself out of a mess, you're not *rescuing* yourself. You're just handling your problems.

What is very interesting in these opening verses is salvation is not being portrayed in terms of rescue, but in terms of God acting to fulfill his will. He will go on to explain the rescue, but here here's emphasizing something else. Salvation is being described in somewhat different terms.

Paul says in verse 3 that God is blessed. He is *praised*. It's an adjective Paul uses to describe God. God simply *is* blessed, and this blessedness is inherent to his being. No one is blessing God; blessed is a characteristic of what it means to be God. Paul is praising God by indicating he is blessed. But then Paul uses the verb form of bless and says God has *blessed* us!

This blessing is an expression of his own character. God himself is blessed—not *by* someone but as a characteristic of his being and out of that nature God has actively blessed us in Christ. It is important to note God is the actor here. As Jim says, God is the First Mover. He is the initiator. God is the one doing something. What he does is in line with his character. There is something in God that causes him to act. When Paul says God is blessed it's an adjective describing God. When he says we are blessed, it's a verb describing something God has done for us. While God *is* blessed, God *blesses* us.

Paul uses another verb to describe what it means that God has blessed us in Christ: he *chose* us in Christ before the foundation of the world. There's no special meaning here. God made a choice. This word is used in the Greek Old Testament a number of times to describe God's actions.

In Nehemiah we're told God chose Abraham *as an individual* and brought him out of Ur and into the land and gave to Abraham a covenant and this covenant would extend to his offspring. In Psalm 105 we read that God chose Aaron *as an individual* and made him a priest and this priesthood would extend to his offspring. In 1 Kings 11 God chose David *as an individual* to be king and this kingship would extend to his offspring. In Isaiah 41 God chose Jacob, renamed Israel, *as an individual* to be the recipient of the covenant he made with Abraham and this covenant would extend to his offspring. In Luke 9 at the transfiguration God spoke to Peter, James, and John and declared that he had chosen *Jesus*. One thing is clear in the New Testament is Jesus is the fulfillment of all of them. He is the promised Offspring. In him all the promises of God find their "Yes", as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians.

God's choice is always of individuals. When Paul says God chose us in Christ, he means each and every person who will trust in Christ was chosen by God before the world was even created. God chose to create for himself a people, and all those who are in Christ are those people, yet his choice was of individuals who would be incorporated into his people. God is the subject of the verb. God is the one doing the action, just as Jesus himself claimed. He told his disciples,

Jn 15:16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

John 15:16

This choice God made was made before the foundation of the world. That is, the choice of individuals was made before the act of creating the world. This means salvation is part of God's plan—or as Paul puts it in chapter 3 of Ephesians, salvation is "according to God's eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord".

Because God's purpose is eternal, beginning before the creation of the world, he has the details worked out. Paul summarizes this in his use of the word "predestined". In verse 5 he says "in love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ". Here we see the purpose of the choice made before the foundation of the world. Predestine means to pre-determine. God determined before the world existed that he would save the individuals he chose to save.

These individuals were predetermined to be adopted as sons of God. In the ancient world adoption was well-known. A man named Gaius Octavian Thurinus was adopted by

Julius Caesar and became the first emperor of Rome—Caesar Augustus. Adults were often adopted. In fact, Caesar Augustus wasn't actually adopted until Julius Caesar died, and that adoption was declared in his will! Adoption removed from a person any prior birthright and granted to that person all the birthrights coming from the adopting parent. By adopting Gaius Octavian, Julius was granting to him all the rights of being Julius' firstborn son. In this case it meant the loyalty of the Roman legions and the submission of the Roman Senate, which is how he was the first emperor.

When Paul says we were predestined to be adopted as sons, it's important to understand why he says "sons" and not "children". Only sons could inherit in the ancient world. To be adopted as God's *sons* means to receive all the rights and privileges of sonship, whether you're male or female. It is to this status, that of God's heirs, that we are predestined, or predetermined to possess.

As with God's *choice*, so it is with adoption: in the ancient world adoption was always of individuals and not of groups. God's choice is not a blanket choice of a group of people who would do a certain thing, namely, believe in Jesus, but a collection of individuals who were predetermined to trust in him. This means God knows his people *individually* and *by name*. Paul uses plural pronouns here but they refer to the collective group of individuals, for both his choosing and his adopting us are as unique, distinct persons who join his group of people. We don't lose our distinct identity even as we are identified together as being "in Christ".

The Meaning of the Verbs

The subject of the verbs is extremely important. God is the actor in salvation. It was his idea. He implemented his plan. He executes his plan. The result is we are saved, but these results are the fruit of God's actions and not the result of what you and I do. He says this in chapter 2:

Eph 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Ephesians 2:8–9

Salvation is the result of God's grace, even as God's grace saves through the means of *faith*. This is similar to what we see in John's Gospel.

Jn 1:12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

John 1:12–13

Here John says all those who received Jesus in faith were given the right to become children of God. That's the adoption Paul is talking about. How did they receive this right? They were *born again* into God's family, but not of blood, meaning not a physical birth. They weren't born into the right family. They weren't born of the will of the flesh, meaning

not by human effort. They weren't born of the will of man, which is to say, they were not born again by an exercise of the human mind. They didn't *choose* the new birth; it was granted to them. When Jesus told Nicodemus he must be born again, he wasn't telling him to *do* something; he was telling him something must be done *to* him. It's what Paul had in mind when he told Timothy how to interact with his opponents.

² Tim 2:24 And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

2 Timothy 2:24–26

How does one come to repent? *God grants repentance.* When does this happen? It happens at the new birth and as we just saw, the new birth is something only God does. Peter put it this way:

¹ Pet 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Peter 1:3–5

God has caused us to be born again. It is God's power at work in a person that brings about the new birth. This is why Jesus told Nicodemus he must be born again. He wasn't telling him he must *do* something. He was telling him that who he was and what he had done was insufficient on its own. God must do something for Nicodemus for him to see the kingdom of heaven. God must grant faith and repentance through the new birth. Notice also that those whom God has caused to be born again are being guarded by God's power and the means God's power uses is their faith! You *must* believe, but even that is God's gift! Salvation is the work of the Lord through and through.

What is significant here is the nature of this action of God. By choosing us as individuals and by predetermining our paths to salvation, God is ensuring the nature of the relationship between himself and his people. We see this in Paul's use of adoption. This implies a direct, personal relationship with God. God claims a person as his own, adopts that person into his family, but not merely to change that person's status! God acts so as to change the nature of the relationship between the individual and God. Whereas there may have once been hostility or mere indifference, now there is a mutual love and delight in each other.

The Purpose of the Verbs

Why does Paul place so much emphasis in these opening chapters on God's sovereign actions in saving his people? God chose us. God predestined us. He goes on to say God lavished his grace on us. God made known to us the mystery of his will. In verse 11 he says again we were predestined according to his purpose. Look at what he says.

Eph 1:11 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, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1:11–12

Notice the reason God predestined us: he works all things according to his will. He didn't ask permission to predestine us! He didn't ask if we wanted to be chosen! God simply acted according to his own will and purpose. Keep in mind that verses 11–12 are part of the sentence that technically begins in verse 3. Why does Paul so strongly emphasize God's sovereignty and God's activity in bringing about the salvation of his people?

It all comes down to magic. The ancient city of Ephesus was a center of magic in the ancient world. We saw a few weeks ago how many of the new believers there decided to burn their books of magic—valued at more than nine-million dollars. They would have destroyed their magic amulets as well. Any physical objects directly related to their former way of life would have been destroyed, too. Do you know what would not have been destroyed? *Their thinking.*

It takes a lot of time to have your mind renewed by the truth of God in Christ. Paul says in Romans 12 to be transformed by the *renewal of your mind*. Your thought patterns and your ways of thinking, your values need to be changed by the gospel of Jesus. The things you find important and the thoughts that are nearly instinctual in you need to be transformed. This does not happen overnight.

It's important to note that the believers in Ephesus—those who trusted in Jesus and repented of their sins—did not burn their books right away. In Acts 19 Luke tells us Paul had been in Ephesus preaching the gospel for about two years when some Jewish exorcists tried to get in on the act and tried to cast out a demon in Jesus' name. Rather than cast out the demon, the demon empowered the man to attack all seven of them and beat the snot out of them.

The entire city heard about this and was filled with fear, but not fear of the demon. They were filled with fear of Christ because it was clear that Paul, who actually proclaimed Christ, had authority over demons while those who simply tried to appropriate the name of Christ did not. It was fear of Christ that filled the people for they recognized his power over spiritual forces of darkness.

It was only at this point the believers brought out the books of magic and burned them. The church was two years old at this point and only now did the believers realize they needed to burn their magic books. How strongly the old ways hold on to us! How strongly the old ways of thinking continue to guide our thoughts and our feelings and our desires! Only when the name of Jesus was demonstrated to be so very powerful did they get rid of the books—more than nine-million dollars' worth!

How many times did their old way of life haunt them? I don't mean haunt them in the sense of guilt or even shame, but in fear the spiritual forces and the various gods and goddesses left behind still held power over them? How many times did something go wrong in their lives only to cause them to wonder if someone had hired a magician to put a spell on them? "Maybe I should have held on to that expensive book so I could counteract that spell..." How many times did something go wrong only for them to have a family member mock

them for it? “I *told* you you should keep offering sacrifices to Artemis; go ahead and worship this Jesus but don’t forget the *other* gods!” How many times did they have something go wrong in their lives only to wonder if it was because they made that business transaction while the Sun was meeting Neptune and Mercury was in retrograde?

It’s easy for us to dismiss astrology for the silliness it is, but you and I have never spent nine million dollars on books of magic. Paul writes this letter to encourage the believers in Ephesus that their lives belong to the Lord Jesus, for he chose them before he created the world. He predestined them to adoption as sons of God. That is, he determined all the steps necessary for them to hear the gospel and believe, including his sovereign action of causing them to be born again.

Spiritual forces of evil have no power over them. Whatever claims demons and magic may have had over them were canceled when they were adopted as God’s sons. All prior claims and identities were ended the moment of their adoption in Christ. They have a new identity, that of belonging to the one true God through his Son Jesus by the power of his Spirit.

Paul emphasizes God’s sovereignty in salvation to reassure the believers in Ephesus of his power to save. There is no one who can prevent his hand from moving any more than there is anyone who can force his hand to move. He, the sovereign God, the Creator of all that has been created, the one who works out his eternal purpose in Christ, chose the Ephesian believers before he created the world, and predestined them to adoption as his sons. They can let go of their former way of life because they have a new identity in Christ.

Application

If we allow ourselves to think of this text and others like it only in terms of theological debate rather than allowing the text to speak for itself, we miss something extraordinary. New Testament scholar Clinton Arnold explains Paul’s point quite well:

...he stresses election because it is an important truth that his readers need to hear and reflect on. Paul’s teaching on election will provide comforting and instructive counter-teaching to the fears of readers who formerly embraced astrology, magical practices, and even the worship of the renowned goddess Artemis. Although cultic images of the Ephesian Artemis depict the signs of the zodiac prominently on her chest as a necklace, she provided false hope to those who looked to her to break the inexorable chains of cosmic fate.

Similarly, those who were accustomed to paying a great deal of money to a local magician for a spell to break a bad horoscope or to thwart the impact of astral spirits on their lives would find Paul’s teaching remarkable and moving. Their fate does not rest with capricious and hostile spirit powers populating the heavenly realms. Their fate and their eternity rest in the hands of the one true God, who has chosen them to be in a relationship with him before the hostile spirit beings even came into existence. Their future is secure and blessed because of their election in Christ and their present dynamic relationship to him.

Clinton Arnold, ZECNT, p. 83

Scripture simply isn't interested in answering our questions on this issue. The only time Paul comes close, he does so with a rhetorical question of his own:

Rom 9:19 You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

Romans 9:19–21

Paul begins this letter to the church in Ephesus with a strong, sustained declaration of God's sovereignty in salvation, claiming that God chose each and every one of them before he created the world, and he predestined each and every one of them to be adopted as his sons, granting them all the rights and privileges of being God's sons.

We may have been taught to react to words like this, either positively or negatively, but Paul was not using these words to give theobros something to argue about. Paul was addressing the church in Ephesus as their loving pastor, their shepherd in the faith. Though he had not seen them in several years and may have never met some of them, he loves them and he knows them, which means he knows their fears and their struggles. He writes to encourage them to continue in faith in Jesus, knowing he and he alone is sovereign over all things.

You and I may not believe in Artemis. You and I may not live in fear of what astrology may have to say about today or tomorrow or next week. Maybe some of you do. You and I may not live in fear of offending other gods by not bowing down to them. What we do fear is the unknown. We do fear the lack of control that we have over our lives. We fear the prospect of trying to buy a house or what the medical tests will show. We fear we will never gain control over sin in our lives. We fear we will never measure up, that we will never be pretty enough or make enough money. We fear going through life unmarried, or we fear going through life *married*.

We fear loneliness and insignificance. We fear we'll never have close, intimate friendships. We fear what others think of us, whether casual friends or lifelong friends and family. We fear having to face another holiday without our loved ones. We fear our loved ones will remain lost and never trust in Christ.

Paul writes about God's choice in salvation before the foundation of the world and of their having been predestined to adoption as sons of God to explain how they came to faith in Jesus. He is not writing about how to engage in evangelism. He is writing to point them to the one they can trust with the most-important details of life.

At the end of it all, who would you rather have be in control of your salvation—you, or God? Who would you rather be in control of the salvation of your loved ones—them, or God? Whatever sins have captured you or those you dearly love, whatever spiritual forces of oppression may seek to weigh you down or weigh them down, they have been defeated. They cannot stop the hand of Jesus from saving. They cannot prevent God's actions to save.

Years ago I heard Tim Keller share a story of a missionary in Korea who worked among prostitutes. It's not hard to imagine that in a culture that emphasizes class, prostitutes would recognize they were at the bottom. Literally everyone else was above them in the

social hierarchy. This missionary would share the gospel with these women, telling them of God's love to them in Christ. Again and again they rebuffed the missionary's words, for there was no way God's love could be for them. Surely God knows what they are.

The missionary realized she needed a different approach so one day she told the ladies that God is sovereign. If they understood anything it was that others had power and authority. They understood that ultimate power and authority lay with God and God alone. She told them that God, in his sovereign will and purpose, had chosen many to be the recipients of his grace and mercy, of his love and compassion, and that he did so based entirely on his own will and desire to save and not at all on based on those he would save.

Suddenly the women had a glimmer of hope, for they knew they had nothing to offer God. They asked her how they could know if they were among those chosen before the foundation of the world. The missionary told them that God loves those he chose and he sent his Son to die for their sins, so that if anyone would come to him in faith, he or she would be saved and adopted into God's family and would receive God's great salvation.

It was only then, when these ladies stopped focusing on themselves and their own sense of worth and their own sense of agency, that they could trust in Christ for salvation. Many came to faith and repentance that day. Their faith in Jesus resulted in their adoption as God's sons, which ended all prior claims to their lives. They were granted a new identity in Christ, for through faith they were a new creation. They now belong to God himself.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. During our Scripture reading we lit the Joy candle, signifying the joy that is ours in Christ. Our joy is this: God became one of us that he might do for us what we would not and could not do for ourselves. He claimed us as his own, thereby releasing us from all prior claims. He adopted us as his own, thereby granting us all the rights and privileges that belong to his dear children. Nothing could give us greater joy than this: the Sovereign God, the Lord of the universe, the Creator of all that has been created, knows us individually and by name. He has called us into an intimate relationship with him, even as he has placed us in his church.