

## Introduction

Last Thursday in City Group our conversation somehow came around to an interesting Christmas tradition in Japan. On Christmas Day sales for KFC can be up to ten times higher than normal. A significant part of this becoming an annual tradition was a marketing campaign by Japan's first KFC franchise owner, who eventually became CEO of KFC Japan.

What is truly interesting about this is fewer than one-percent of Japanese people claim to be followers of Christ. Why, then, do so many observe Christmas, even if by eating fried chicken? The practical answer has to do with World War 2 and Japan's post-war economic growth. Through the influence of American culture and the greater economic flexibility of Japanese families, American restaurants really took off, particularly in the 1970s. It was in 1974 that the "Kentucky for Christmas" campaign began and in the nearly 50 years since, KFC and Christmas in Japan have been linked.

The truth is that in Japan Christmas is not a formal holiday and those who observe it do so in a way that is utterly separate from its real meaning. Families often get together and presents are exchanged. They often have Christmas trees and lights. Rather than fruitcake or pie, families often eat sponge cake with cream and strawberries.

Perhaps an even greater truth is that the Japanese are simply more honest in their observance of Christmas, not even pretending to embrace its spiritual significance. The reality of it all is that Christmas is, in fact, global in scope. This is because the reason for Christmas is global in scope. No, it's more than that. The entire purpose of Christmas is cosmic—universal—in scope.

Today is Christmas Sunday. We celebrated Christmas last Monday and when Christmas is not on a Sunday Christmas Sunday is the Sunday after Christmas. We had a Christmas sermon last week since it was Christmas Eve but as we will see, our text in Ephesians this morning is thoroughly about Christmas and the incarnation—God becoming man. We will see just how vast God's plans for his creation really are. We're in Ephesians 1, verses 3–10.

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, <sup>4</sup> even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love <sup>5</sup> he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, <sup>6</sup> to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. <sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, <sup>8</sup> which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Ephesians 1:3–10

## The Incarnation

In verse 3 Paul writes what at first glance appears to be a normal declaration of praise. Looking a bit deeper, however, reveals something extraordinary. He says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”. God is blessed, or praised. Spoken highly of. That’s pretty normal stuff, right? No, it’s not. It’s a declaration of the incarnation of the Son of God and a much greater act of God’s self-revelation.

What we’re seeing here is God’s name is updated from the time of theocratic Israel. In the Old Testament he was the LORD, the God of Israel. He was YHWH God *of Israel*. However, from the beginning of time God’s plan was to save men and women from every tribe and language and people and nation. We see this in his sovereign choice to save many, a choice that was made before the foundation of the world. We see this in the exodus from Egypt when “a mixed multitude” of people joined the ethnic descendants of Abraham and together received the covenant at Mount Sinai. This mixed multitude of people from a variety of nations joined together as the people of Israel.

Throughout Israel’s history foreigners who would worship the God of Israel were welcomed in as part of Israel. We see this when Rahab—the Canaanite—marries the son of the most prominent man in the tribe of Judah, which was the most prominent tribe in all Israel. Caleb, Joshua’s right-hand man, was a foreigner who joined Israel. Many of David’s “mighty men”—his most-trusted soldiers—were not native-born Israelites.

It was only when Israel was sent into exile that the people of Israel began rejecting the other nations. No longer were they welcomed among the people of God. The law of Moses, once believed to be God’s self-revelation *to the world*, was suddenly an iron wall to separate Israel from the nations—the Gentiles. In the Jewish mind, the God of Israel had become the God of *only* Israel.

In this otherwise ordinary declaration of praise, Paul shares a major theme in this letter. God’s name is updated from being the God of Israel, to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the true Israel, *the* Offspring promised to Abraham. In Jesus, the true Israel, all the promises of God find their Yes. He is the God of Jesus, but he’s also the Father of Jesus, for the Son of God took on human form. This was through the miracle of the Holy Spirit overshadowing the virgin Mary and causing her to conceive Jesus in her womb.

Though Israel had forgotten its role as missionaries to the nations, Jesus, the true Israel, sought to restore that mission and commanded his holy apostles to make disciples *of all nations*. Salvation was always for those in every tribe and language and people and nation. Jesus restores God’s original plan for the world and is himself God’s full and complete revelation.

Everything that *can* be known about God can be known in Christ. As Hebrews says, Jesus is the exact imprint of God’s divine nature. He is the Son of God who took on human form in order to save his people from their sins.

Paul says that this God, the one who is the God and Father of the Lord Jesus, “has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”. Here we see God’s self-revelation even more. He is God in Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is the Father of the Lord Jesus, and has blessed us with every *spiritual* blessing in the heavenly places.

The word “spiritual” means “of the Spirit”. The blessings we receive in Christ are “of the

Spirit”. Further, they are in the heavenly places. This refers to the realm of the Holy Spirit. Being spirit, the Holy Spirit is not physical or earthly, though he dwells among God’s people on earth. He exists in that “space” occupied by God. In other words, God is the Father of Jesus, and Jesus is Lord, and through the presence and activity of the Spirit of God we are blessed. God in Trinity is at work here.

We see this activity in this first chapter. We see the election of the Father. He chose us in Christ. We see the redemption of the Son. The Son purchased our salvation. Later in the chapter, which we’ll look at next week, the Spirit seals us, guaranteeing our inheritance. Salvation is thoroughly Trinitarian!

## Chosen in Christ

This salvation is only possible because God made a choice. In verse 4 Paul says God the Father chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. What’s remarkable about this choice is the choice is of *us*. Steven Baugh points out we are “the most distant foreigners”, and therefore the last people who should be chosen.

In Romans 5 Paul shares how they were not deserving of salvation. In 1 Corinthians 1 he tells them they were not from the elite in society. In chapter 2 of Ephesians he says we were born “children of wrath”. In Colossians he says we were in “the domain of darkness”. We have nothing in us that would capture God’s attention, yet God chose us in Christ!

The word “chose” means a specific, individual choice. In the ancient world it was used of plucking gray hairs! If you have gray hairs, you are very careful to *choose* the right ones to pluck, because you ain’t got that many left! God specifically, individually chose those he would save. (If you missed the sermon from a couple weeks ago, we focused on what this really means. It’s available on our website.)

Notice the choice is *in Christ*, which reveals its purpose: that we should be holy and blameless before him. This status of holy and blameless is “before him”, which means while we are not actually holy and blameless, when God sees us, he sees us *in Christ* and because Christ is actually holy and blameless, God sees us in him as holy and blameless.

The purpose is not merely that of a status before God, but that you and I would begin to match our status. Salvation is intended to make us like Christ and the way God begins this process is first to reconcile us to himself through Christ, then, having every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, the Spirit of God works in us to make us like Christ.

This is why he predestined us: it is the working out of the purpose of his will. In verse 5 he says it’s in love that God predestined us, but as with his choice, it’s personal. It’s not merely an eternal state God predestined. He predestined us as individuals for adoption as sons. In Greek Paul could have said “adoption as sons” or “adoption as daughters” or even “adoption as children”. There’s a word specific to each, but here he specifically says “adoption as sons”.

The language of adoption first of all implies personal relationship. God enters into a relationship with his people through adoption, but the nature of that relationship is revealed when Paul says he adopts us as his *sons*—even if you’re a woman. This is legal language, for in the first century *sons* inherited their fathers’ estates. By saying we’re adopted *as sons* he’s pointing out that because we are in Christ—God’s Firstborn Son—we inherit all things with his Son! This is Paul’s point in Galatians:

Gal 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Galatians 3:28–29

Only sons inherited in the ancient world, therefore all who are in Christ—male or female—receive an inheritance. We receive this inheritance because of our union with Christ. We are united with him. In verse 6 this adoption as sons is to the praise of his glorious grace, *with which he has blessed us in the Beloved*. This isn't a common expression for Jesus, but Paul is citing the Gospels:

Mt 3:17 ...and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:17

It is because we are in Christ that we also are beloved, adopted into God's family as his heirs. In Christ we receive all things.

## Redemption

In verse 7 Paul continues listing the spiritual blessings that are ours in the heavenly places. In him, that is, in Christ we have redemption through his blood. When we hear the word "redemption" we generally think of it as a purely religious word. Outside the faith we really only use it with coupons. When you use a coupon, you are *redeeming* the coupon—that is, removing an obligation for payment, or at least a portion of a payment. You're exchanging something of value.

In the ancient world it was not a religious term. Two groups of people were redeemed: slaves and those who were kidnapped. A slave could purchase himself out of slavery, for slaves could often have jobs in addition to the work they did for the slave owner. Whether one sold one's self into slavery as a way out of a debt or out of extreme poverty—which was quite common—or one was a slave because he was a prisoner of war, one could be redeemed from slavery through payment to the slave owner.

So also with one who had been kidnapped. In this case the payment—still a redemption—was also a ransom. You exchanged something of value for that person. Whether redemption was needed for a slave or a victim of kidnapping, the responsibility for redemption fell to that person's family. *Who else would pay it?* You wouldn't kidnap someone and send a ransom note to his neighbor or to his second grade teacher.

The problem you and I face is we were born spiritual orphans. We were born without a true spiritual family. There was no one to redeem us. *We had no family.* ...Do you see it? Do you see what's happening here? Eph 1:4b "In love <sup>5</sup> he predestined us for adoption *to himself* as sons through Jesus Christ."

Do you see it? By adopting us as his sons, God is bringing us into his family, that he might take our debt upon himself! In Christ, he says, we have redemption through his blood. That is the price he had to pay for *his family*! This payment was for "the forgiveness of our trespasses"—that's our debt we could not repay. We were sold into spiritual slavery with a

debt far beyond our ability and God acts to take our debt upon himself, and the price he paid was the blood of his Son who first became human in order to have blood that could be given as payment!

Paul says this is “according to the *riches* of his grace, which he *lavished* on us”! Do you see it? Because the Father has adopted us as his sons we become co-heirs with Christ, which means all the Father’s vast resources are also our resources, and he spared none of them in order to redeem us. Listen: when it came to paying the price to purchase our freedom, *God did not haggle*. He just paid it! He wasn’t trying to finagle a better deal. Whatever it cost, he just wrote that check.

Instead of paying the minimum necessary, God lavished the riches of his grace on us. Do you see why Paul says we have been blessed with *every* spiritual blessing in the heavenly places? He has not withheld a single spiritual blessing! Here’s the truly remarkable thing: this was God’s plan all along! Look at the language Paul uses throughout this text.

God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. He predestined us for adoption as sons. God did these things. He did so “according to the purpose of his will”. God purchased us through the blood of Jesus, according to his grace which he lavished on us, verse 9, “making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose”.

This purpose is “set forth in Christ”. I love how Steven Baugh put it:

The incarnate Son as Messiah is the center of the Trinitarian God’s redemptive work.

S. M. Baugh, EEC

Here we see what Paul meant in Acts 20 when he spoke with the council of elders from Ephesus about five years before he wrote this letter. He told them he had declared to them “the whole counsel of God”. This is God’s eternal purpose in Christ. The Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has been working to bring about our salvation since before he created the world. In fact, this is his purpose for creating the world.

## The Plan

As he reveals to us “the mystery of his will”, we see that it is “set forth in Christ”. That is, God’s work centers on Jesus. As I’ve said before, this is why we are *Christians*, not *Spiritians* or *Fatherians*. We follow Christ, who is our God.

Notice what he says in verse 10. The mystery of his will, his purpose in the world, is “a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth”. What is that plan? It is what he started in us! It the complete and total restoration of all things.

I said a few weeks ago that God does not have a Plan B. In fact, he doesn’t even have Plan A. He simply has *his plan*. His plan is all-encompassing. It includes responding to your prayers, which means your prayers matter! God uses means, which is to say God works out his plan through others, and part of working out his plan is working through your prayers, so pray! It really does make a difference. When you read on Signal that your sister in Christ is discouraged, encourage her. When your brother in is struggling in some way, pray for him and exhort him to greater faithfulness. Your obedience is part of God’s plan!

This is why, even though we are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world and have been predestined for adoption as sons, we must still believe. God doesn't save us apart from our faith, but has determined that we would believe and when we do, he saves us.

This is the sort of language we're seeing here. God is working out his purposes in the world, and the outcome of his purposes, the intended goal, the mystery of his will, is his plan for the fullness of time. This plan is to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

Just as Jesus was born "in the fullness of time", so the completion of God's plan that began before he created the world will be completed in the fullness of time. That is, when God has orchestrated history to its right point this fullness will be here and all things will be united in Christ. What does that mean, exactly? Here's how one scholar explains it:

The verse demonstrates the cosmic nature of the entire letter to the Ephesians: the significance of Christ is not simply to unite humanity to God, but to bring the whole of creation into right relationship with him—heavenly beings as well as those on earth. The theme of cosmic unification unfolds through the letter, beginning with the subjugation of every ruler and authority, power and dominion in chapter 1 (1:20–21), moving through the reconciliation of humanity in chapter 2 (first to God in 2:1–10, then to itself in 2:11–22), and the cosmic centrality of the church in chapter 3 (3:8–10, 21; cf. 1:22–23). As Ralph P. Martin concludes, "There is no aspect of human society or sentient life outside the scope of this reconciliation and no hostile forces, to be mentioned in 6:11–18, that can frustrate God's eternal purpose." As such, the verse affirms the Pauline teaching of the renewal, rather than replacement, of the creation (cf. Rom 8:18–25). It "is renewed by virtue of its realignment to Christ."

Constantine R. Campbell, PNTC

God's plan is complete and total. It is to renew his creation, to restore it to what it was supposed to be. It's true that the fall of mankind was part of his plan, though he did not cause it. It's also true that the world's restoration and God dwelling on earth with his people is part of his plan, but this time he *will* cause it. It all falls under his purposes.

This is why the book of Revelation ends with the new heavens and new earth. They are not new in the sense of replacement, but new in *quality*. God restores his creation—the entire universe—to what it was supposed to be all along. Sin, which is rebellion on a cosmic scale, is the cause of all that is wrong and God in Christ through his Spirit is restoring all things and this restoration begins with those he chose in Christ before the foundation of the world.

## God's Universal Plan

In these verses Paul lays out a central theme for his letter to the Ephesian church. God is uniting all things in Christ. The word he uses in verse 10 when he says God's plan is "to unite" all things in Christ carries the idea of a summary. The aim, the end point, the fullness of God's plan for the fullness of time is that all things would be placed under the Lordship of Christ.

This is why we are to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. We must remember the scope of this, for it is *universal*. All people will one day be brought under the Lordship of Christ. All beings that are described in Ephesians as “all rule and authority and power and dominion” are said to have been placed under his feet. It is only a matter of time before they all recognize it.

In chapter 6 Paul describes these spiritual beings as rulers, authorities, cosmic powers over this present darkness, and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. All these will, in the fullness of time, come under the Lordship of Christ. His rule will be complete and total.

As Jesus explained it, his kingdom starts out small, like a mustard seed, but will continue to grow until it fills the entire garden. It is like yeast put into a massive ball of dough. Though it starts out small, it will grow until the entire lump of dough is filled with it. It cannot be stopped and it cannot be contained. The prophet Daniel saw the day when the Lord would establish a kingdom that would never end.

Dan 2:44 And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever...

Daniel 2:44

“In the days of those kings” refers to the greatest kingdom represented by the statue in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. He himself would be the head made of gold. Then would come two more kingdoms, represented by bronze. Valuable, but not gold. Finally there would be a kingdom of iron—strong, unbreakable, yet mixed with clay. We know from history this kingdom was the empire of Rome. It was strong—the strongest empire on earth—yet it was brittle. Filled with civil war and the need for ever-increasing conquest to feed the beast of empire. It was brittle.

It was in the days of those kings—the Roman emperors—that the God of heaven set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed. Daniel says this kingdom will bring an end to all other kingdoms, and this kingdom will stand forever. This kingdom, the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, will stand forever, though it started out as a mustard seed, tiny and seemingly inconsequential—as inconsequential as a baby born to a single, unwed mother who was poor.

What this means, at least in part, is our understanding of the mission of God must never be reduced to a single nation. We must never allow the idea of Christian nationalism to take root in our hearts, as if God’s work has ever centered on a single nation. It was never centered on a single nation, even though God called Israel to be his people at Mount Sinai and gave them the law and sent them the prophets. His plan was always for Israel to be his missionaries to the nations.

To seek to make any nation a so-called “Christian nation” is to miss God’s plan. *Completely*. His kingdom does not grow through military conquest or through government fiat. It is not an action of a legislature or a king. His kingdom grows as men and women submit to the Lord Jesus and seek to follow him.

If we elected a Christian president and 435 Christian Congressmen and 50 Christian governors and had state legislatures dominated by Christians, the kingdom of God would

not grow any faster than God's plans and purposes have determined it would grow, no matter how many laws they passed. God is causing the kingdom of Jesus to grow in every tribe, in every language, in every people, and in every nation.

If you compare the number of missionaries sent as a percentage of a population, you'd be surprised at who you should be asking God to bless. By all means, pray that God would bless America, but Palestinian Christians send out more than 3,400 missionaries for every million Christians. In comparison, the United States only sends out 614 for every million Christians. We should pray that God would bless them even more, for they are reaching the world for Christ. This is all part of his incredibly vast plan for the world.

## Application

On that first Christmas day, God entered this world as one of us. The Son of God took on human form that he might become what we are. Here is the remarkable thing, church: he became what we are that we might become what he is. We don't—*couldn't*—become God, but we become more and more like him.

2 Cor 3:18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:18

Rom 8:29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Romans 8:29

Col 3:10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

Colossians 3:10

1 Cor 15:49 Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

1 Corinthians 15:49

1 Jn 3:2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

1 John 3:2

On Christmas God became what we are in order that we would become what he is. As God in Trinity works out our salvation, he is forming us more and more into the image of Christ. We begin to resemble him. We begin to take on his characteristics—his *human* characteristics, for we can never be all-powerful or omnipresent. As we become more like Christ we become more loving, more peaceful, more patient, more kind, filled with more goodness, more faithful, more gentle, more self-controlled.

These characteristics are the fruit of the Spirit working in us, and are simply a down payment on what all of creation will be when the fullness of time has come. Do you see it? I hope you see it. God's work is *vast*. His work in Christ encompasses the entire universe—it



is *universal*. Everything will be transformed as it is united together in Christ who is Lord of all.

As big as it is, however, as vast as God's work is, it's also as small as you are. Yes, God in Christ through his Spirit is working to transform the entire universe, but this work begins in you *as an individual*. He works in you through his church, but he works in *you* for his choice before the foundation of the world was *you*. It was me. It was her. It was him. He chose us as individuals to be the recipients of his lavish grace, his riches in Christ. He paid a very high price to make us his people.

I don't know about your 2023, but my 2023 was filled with great uncertainty, particularly with my health. I spent entirely too much time worrying about whether my little buddy was cancer. I spent entirely too much time worrying about whether my life was going to end soon. The truth is every single moment of my life—and yours—falls under his plan. He has it all under control.

Whether 2024 brings suffering and pain or it brings even more joy and prosperity than you can imagine, all of it is being brought under the headship of Christ. He is working in *you* and in *me* to make us more like Christ, every day. Hear this precious promise from Romans 8.

Rom 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

<sup>8:31</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. <sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

Romans 8:28–35

That last question is rhetorical. Nothing can separate us from his love. Not cancer. Not surgery. Not the pain of loss. Not loneliness or depression or financial distress. We know this because God has predestined us for adoption as his sons and sent his Firstborn Son to redeem us through his blood, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished on us. If not even our sin could keep us separated from God, what else could possibly separate us? Only God could, and he's the one who chose to adopt us in the first place.

The wonder is not only that he gave his Son but that he did so in this way, by sacrificing the one he loved. It is astonishing that he gave the Beloved for those who hated him. See how highly he honors us. If even when we hated him and were enemies he gave the Beloved, what will he not do for us now?

John Chrysostom, Homily on Ephesians 1.1.8

Because this is true, because of God's love to us in Christ, Merry Christmas, church, and Happy New Year.