

Introduction

One of the most formative moments of my life happened in college. I was a fairly new Christian; my conversion was about four years prior to this moment. God used an Independent Fundamental Baptist church to draw me to himself and while I will be forever grateful for this church, the handful of years I spent there took quite some time to undo. There were lots of rules and lots of image-maintenance. You had to look the part as much as you had to be the part. Godliness was as much what others thought of you as it was an inward reality—and perhaps more.

I managed to play basketball in college. In my second year we had some new players transfer in. One was Steve Lee. He was a large man, and a bit brusque. He seemed to like me because in our first practice I caught an elbow from him and immediately gave him one back. He stepped up to me and I just knew I had made the biggest mistake of my life. Instead of crushing me he just stared at me for a moment and then jogged down to the other end of the court. Later he would tell me that was the moment he started to like me because I was willing to stand up to him. You ever have one of those moments where you knew you were about to die? That was mine.

Again, I was only a couple years out of the fundamentalist church. The rules about music with drum beats and guitars were still in my head. While I went around telling everyone about my “freedom in Christ” to listen to thrash metal, there was still a nagging sense that I was wrong and those fundamentalists were right. Then one day Steve played some music in the locker room. I was shocked at the lyrics I was hearing. The name of the group was “N. W. A.” (If you know, you know.) I can’t even say some of their song titles. When Coach walked in he quickly turned it off. Until Coach left.

As a young fundamentalist still, I was shocked at the brazen *rebellion* against God. I couldn’t believe no one else would stand up for what is good and right. We were students at a Christian college and listening to foul and profane music. I sat there in stunned silence.

The moment that was formative came the following season. Steve walked into the locker early in the season and grabbed his radio. I thought, “Oh, no. Here we go again.” This time he played some gospel music. I said, “Steve, no N. W. A.? No Public Enemy? No Ice Cube?” He told me he didn’t listen to those groups anymore. “Why?” He said, “That music doesn’t help me. It just brings me down.”

I was stunned. No one had come down on him with rules for what music was acceptable and what music was not. The Spirit of God had been working in Steve, bringing him to the point he realized the detriment that music could have on him. I had spent most of my four years as a believer *fighting against sin*, taking it head-on as if my life depended on it. At the very least, my status before the Lord depended on my ability to be holy, and this effort of mine depended entirely on the rules I had to set for myself—or were set for me by others.

Suddenly I was confronted by a guy who did not live according to all these rules but who was regularly being confronted by the truth of God in Christ and this truth *was changing*

him. I had so many questions! How can a person change without obeying a list of rules? How can a person experience real life transformation apart from laws governing every aspect of his or her life? Could it be that God did not actually need a list of rules to change a person, but gospel truth?

Here I am more than 30 years later and I am still working through this. What we've been seeing in Ephesians 1 is exactly this: the truth of God in Christ is what brings about life transformation as his Spirit applies that truth to us and the Spirit causes us to change. The gospel is that *God* is making all things new, not that *we* are making *ourselves* new.

We're in Ephesians 1, starting in verse 11.

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. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1:11–14

The Counsel of His Will

Paul is continuing his thought from the previous section. As we saw last week, the “whole counsel of God” is God’s eternal purpose in Christ. This plan is vast and all-inclusive. The entire cosmos, all of creation, will be renewed and restored when Christ comes again. Until he comes, he is ever at work bringing about that cosmic renewal by focusing on those whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world and has predestined us for adoption as his sons—his rightful heirs. God’s cosmic transformation begins in his people and will culminate in the universe itself being recreated on the day of Christ.

By adopting us as his sons, God brings us into his family, placing on himself the obligation for redeeming us from slavery, which he did by sending his Firstborn Son Jesus, whose blood purchases our freedom. In verse 11 Paul says in him, that is, in Christ we have obtained an inheritance. This is the direct outcome of our adoption. As we saw last week, Paul uses the language of the day to describe this when he says we are *sons* of God, whether male or female. He put it this way in his letter to the Galatians:

Gal 4:6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Galatians 4:6–7

It is in Christ—“through God”—that we receive this inheritance. It is entirely through his decisions and his actions on our behalf that we receive it. As 1 Peter puts it, he has caused us to be born again. This new birth is our adoption, our entrance into a new family, *God’s family*.

Paul says again in verse 11 we have “been predestined according to the purpose of him who work all things according to the counsel of his will”. God’s initiative is emphasized

in these words. God's sovereign decision is emphasized here. Everything in this text emphasizes God's decision. When he says we have "obtained" an inheritance the word means to determine by casting lots. As Proverbs 16:33 says, the lot is cast but its every decision is from the Lord. God *determined* we would receive an inheritance, and not arbitrarily or capriciously, but in love.

This choice and its corresponding action of predestination, he says, is "according to the *purpose* of him who works all things according to the *counsel* of his *will*. With these three words Paul once again emphasizes God's authority and sovereignty in salvation. God's purpose and his counsel and his will all demonstrate his prior determination.

His purpose is his planning beforehand. The word carries the idea of planning in advance, of laying out what he will do. As we read in verse 4 this purpose was laid out before the foundation of the world. (Once again, if you missed the sermon a few weeks ago in which I explained predestination and election in more detail, be sure to check it out on our website.)

Having this plan laid out, God is the one who *works all things*. God brings about his purpose. This is his *counsel*, or his decision or resolution. It is his sovereign action to accomplish his decision. Further, this counsel is "of his will". His will is what he desires to happen, but desires in a way that moves him to action. It isn't wishful thinking, but active intent. I *desire* ten million dollars. We could buy out the porn shop next door and *redeem* that property for its rightful purpose! I can't make ten million dollars happen. God's will is his active intention to make a thing happen. God predestined us according to his purpose and God works all things according to the counsel of his will.

Do you get the sense that salvation is not about you and is not about what you do but about God and what God has done? Over and over again this is what Paul has been saying in this chapter. There is an intended outcome to it as well. His work in salvation is "so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory". God is glorified in us when he saves us!

The Word of Truth

While Paul's emphasis is on God's sovereign decision to save many from their sins, it isn't as though we're automatons with no responsibility and no part in the matter. To be clear: salvation begins with God's initiating choice to save and God's work of predestination and God's action in adopting us. Again as Peter says, salvation comes about when God causes us to be born again. However, you and I still have a part!

In verse 13 he says in Christ we "heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him". Faith is a necessary component of salvation. Without faith there is no salvation for faith is the means God uses to save us. As I've said before, faith is the only currency God accepts from us.

The believers in Ephesus heard the word of truth, which is the gospel of Jesus. The gospel of Jesus is not a call to action. So often when we think of someone "sharing the gospel", the gospel is being reduced to a formula or to steps the person must take in order to be saved. We tell people to pray a certain prayer, and hocus pocus! You're a Christian! Or we tell people: "God loves you. You're a sinner and separated from God. Jesus is the only way to God. You must receive him in order to be saved." These four statements—"spiritual laws"—are true, but the gospel is a call to action *only by implication*.

In Matthew we read of the beginning of Jesus' ministry on earth. In chapter 4 he says Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and *proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom*. Notice he *proclaimed* it; he didn't *share* it. In chapter 9 he continued teaching and *proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom*.

In Matthew 24 Jesus tells his disciples the "gospel of this kingdom will be *proclaimed* throughout the whole world". It won't be "shared", but *proclaimed*. In Matthew 26 when a woman anoints his feet with oil—in preparation for his burial—he tells them wherever the "gospel is *proclaimed*" what she has done will also be told.

In Matthew Jesus speaks of the gospel as something that is *proclaimed*. In Mark he often refers to "the *preaching* of the gospel". "Preaching the gospel" is a translation of a single word because we don't have a single-word equivalent in English. Mark says Jesus went around *gospelizing* or announcing good news—*proclaiming* good news.

Luke, both in his Gospel and in Acts, often writes of preaching the gospel—*gospelizing* the people. Inherent in the very idea of "gospel" is proclamation. It was a regular word that Jesus and the disciples used to convey an idea. A "gospel" was simply good news. It could have religious meaning. When the birth of an emperor was announced, the announcement was "good news". This fed into the imperial cult in which the emperor was worshiped.

A common way in which the word was used was that of the proclamation of victory. When an enemy marched against a city the king might meet them miles from the city walls. This would place the battle far beyond the sight of anyone in the city. If that king were successful in defeating the enemy a messenger—an *evangelist*—would be sent to proclaim to the city the good news of the king's victory.

In that scenario, the gospel—the proclamation of victory—is not a call to action. The messenger does not say, "If you will do this thing, *then* the king will be victorious". The message, or the *gospel* is that the king *is* victorious. The implication of the king's victory is the people respond to the proclamation of victory by rejoicing and celebrating what the king has accomplished.

Similarly, the gospel of Jesus is the message of his victory. It is the proclamation of what he has done. It is good news for he has accomplished everything necessary for our salvation. The *implication* of this is that one should repent and believe, but one's repentance and faith do not in any way affect the truth of Christ's victory. What it affects is whether his victory is good news *to that person*.

In Acts 15 Peter is explaining to the Jerusalem council what God had done through him. God revealed that salvation is for Gentiles as well as Jews. Peter said that "by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe". Their faith is not the word of the gospel, but a *response* to the word of the gospel. It is an *implication* of the gospel. Faith is the right response to the good news of Christ's victory, but is not itself the gospel.

Sealed

When the gospel is proclaimed, those hearing it will either believe or they will not believe. Some may show interest and may come to faith later, but at the time of hearing the gospel, there is a response of either faith or continued unbelief. The response does not change the content of the proclamation, because the gospel is not "if you", but "Christ has". Listen: "if you" is not good news! If the gospel were in any way dependent on J-T, J-T would be lost!

The gospel proclamation is Jesus is victorious. Because he is victorious we have confidence that God in Christ through his Spirit is working out God's plan set in place before time itself even existed. The right response to this proclamation is faith! Not everyone responds appropriately.

2 Cor 2:15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. ~~Who is sufficient for these things?~~

Whether one smells death or one smells life, the aroma doesn't change. The gospel of Jesus doesn't change based on one's response to it. To those who respond appropriately, who breathe in the aroma of Christ as a fragrance from life to life, the application of the victory of Christ is immediate and profound.

Paul says in verse 13 when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and *when you believed in him*, you "were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit". The gospel of Jesus is applied to you when you believe. We are not automatons. We must believe the gospel. When we do, God seals us *with* the promised Holy Spirit. Notice he doesn't say "by the Holy Spirit".

The Holy Spirit had long been promised to God's people in conjunction with the new covenant. The covenant given to Israel at Sinai had a flaw: it could not change the people's hearts. God promised a new covenant in which he would write his laws on their hearts and would change them from the inside out. The law of Moses could only change them from the outside in, which didn't work.

Necessary to this inner change is the Holy Spirit. The prophet Ezekiel explained how God's people would finally obey him and lived the transformed life he always intended.

Ezek 36:27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.
Ezekiel 36:27

The Spirit is given and the Spirit so transforms a person that he or she begins to walk in his statutes and is careful to obey his rules. That language is from the old covenant. The real issue is not about following a list of rules but of becoming more like Christ. This is why Paul says in Galatians if we walk by the Spirit we will not gratify the desires of the flesh. He lists several examples like sexual immorality and jealousy and drunkenness and envy. If we walk by the Spirit we will bear the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the statutes the Spirit causes us to walk in. These are the rules the Spirit causes us to obey.

Notice Paul says God seals us with the Spirit. A seal is a mark of ownership. The evidence we belong to God is the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is the sign of the new covenant. When Paul argues against circumcision in Galatians, he points them to the reality of the Spirit's presence and activity among them. The Spirit is the evidence one is in Christ. Without the Spirit's presence and activity there is no evidence, and therefore no confidence a person is in Christ.

We should be very careful whom we say is a follower of Christ absent any evidence of the Spirit's power at work in that person, making him or her more like Christ. We should also

be careful to recognize the evidence is not perfection. The seal is evidence God is presently *working*, for the work ain't done! We're on the path to holiness, not at its destination. There must be evidence of progress, for without the presence and activity of the Spirit there is no evidence one is in Christ, no matter how many times that person prayed a prayer.

To the Praise of His Glory

In verse 14 Paul says the seal of the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance. He brings us back once again to our adoption as sons of God. The Spirit must guarantee our inheritance for we do not currently possess it. He says the Spirit guarantees it *until we acquire possession of it*. That means we don't have it yet. What we have is our status as God's sons and we have the promised Spirit, so it's only a matter of time.

The Spirit is the guarantee, or down payment. The Spirit is the initial payment that *obligates* further payments. In the fourth century Jerome contrasts the difference between a guarantee and pledge.

A guarantee is not the same as a token or pledge. For a guarantee is given as an affidavit and bond for a future purchase. But a pledge...is an expression of a present reciprocal transaction. Thus when the money is returned the pledge is restored by the creditor to the one who has repaid the debt.... So from the guarantee the majestic scope of the future inheritance may be grasped

Jerome, Epistle to the Ephesians 1.1.14

A pledge is simply collateral. Repay what is owed and you get it back. The Holy Spirit is not given as a pledge. The Holy Spirit is given as a guarantee. Church: we will never not have the Spirit present with us! We will never *give back* the Spirit of God, even when the fullness of our salvation is here. The Spirit is the seal, and we will be forever sealed! The marks of God's ownership will always be upon us, never taken away.

Because the Spirit of God is an eternal seal, there is simply no way God's people will fail to receive the fullness of their inheritance. It is *guaranteed*. Paul is saying something significant to the Ephesian believers here.

In verse 11 he says *we* have obtained an inheritance. In verse 12 this is so *we* who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In verse 14 the Spirit is the guarantee of *our* inheritance until *we* acquire possession of it. In verse 13, however, he personalizes God's actions.

In him *you also*, when *you* heard the word of truth, *you* were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. The promises of God are not reserved for an elite group of believers. If you are in Christ, you are the offspring promised to Abraham and through this adoption you receive all the promises of God. There are not degrees of salvation! There is the work God has accomplished in Christ. Those who respond to his victory appropriately, that is, with faith, receive the blessings of his victory.

Your ability to follow God faithfully does not affect Christ's victory. Your ability to manage sin in your life does not alter the victory Jesus has won in any way. Your ongoing struggles with faithfulness do not reduce his faithfulness whatsoever. The gospel is the

proclamation of what Jesus has done and his promise is that even if your faith is tiny—the size of a mustard seed—God accepts that faith and you receive the fullness of his promises.

We are all in the process of spiritual maturation. Spiritual maturity is seen, first and foremost, in our ability to obey the Lord. It is not actually based on time. I've known countless individuals who assumed they were spiritually mature because they had several decades of following Jesus under their belt and because they assumed they had victory over sin when the truth is they simply outgrew youthful lusts. They didn't have the energy for it anymore. They were nearly as infantile spiritually as they had been decades before.

Spiritual maturity comes with submission to Jesus. While we must pursue spiritual maturity, the promises of God are guaranteed by the Spirit, even if your stubborn resistance to his working in your life results in extremely slow growth. Paul says this is to the praise of his glory. In the third century African scholar Marius Victorinus explained:

First the believer is enabled to hope in Christ, that is, follow Christ and believe that all Christ's promises can be fulfilled. Only then will the consequence be that he will live for the praise of the glory of God.

Marius Victorinus, Epistle to the Ephesians 1.1.12

This is the path to maturity. This is the path to becoming more and more like Christ. Notice he doesn't say there is a list of rules to follow. He doesn't say if you manage to someone control your sin. He doesn't say if you can conform to some external standard. He says when you are trusting in Christ the consequence of this faith—which is God's work in you—will be that you will live for the praise of his glory.

As we become more like Jesus the Lord is praised, resulting in his glory being seen more profoundly. We become more like Jesus by seeing him and worshiping him and desiring him above all else. Marius says it is when we *believe* in him the consequences are we live for the praise of his glory. This is an inward transformation that works itself outward. The promise of the Holy Spirit is the Spirit will write God's laws on our *hearts*, not on our *behavior*.

The Spirit is not given to those who trust in Christ so he can change their behavior, but so that he can change their hearts. As their hearts are changed, their behavior follows, for the behavior is but a symptom of the problem. You can't cure a disease only by treating its symptoms.

If you have a piece of wood or maybe glass embedded in your finger, you can take medicine that will help with the pain and will help with the swelling and fight the infection, and it might get better for a time. Your finger will not heal, however, until you deal with the root cause: you have to get that splinter or that glass out. Only then can you heal properly. So it is with sin.

Sin comes from a sinful heart. Only by changing our hearts can our external behavior truly be transformed. If we fail to address the heart our efforts are merely bandaids. The Spirit of God was given to transform us from the inside, and this inner transformation cannot help but work its way outside.

Application

This is one of those passages of Scripture—the entirety of chapter 1—where it would be far easier to just lecture and teach and expound the profound mysteries of it. We could focus

solely on the doctrines of grace and discuss how it affects our systematic theology. I could approach this chapter in a way that enables each of you to write a doctrine paper that would receive an A in a first-year systematic theology course. And none of it would change your life.

The Christian life of following Jesus is never just head knowledge. There are churches that seek to provide you with plenty of that. It is good to know more. It is good to grow in our knowledge of the Scriptures. It is good to grow in our systematic theology, which simply means our understanding of how it all fits together. The ancient Israelites had knowledge. They had the Scriptures. They had direct, immediate revelation from God through the prophets, and it didn't do them any real good.

The challenge to true gospel preaching is finding a way to drive the truth of Scripture deep into our hearts. It is to recognize that the God who created the universe is directing his activities toward us in Christ. Hear what Paul is saying to us, and therefore what God himself is saying to us.

God determined we would receive an inheritance. To ensure we would receive it he predestined us according to his purpose. He works all things according to his purpose—his pre-planned efforts—to bring about his decision, or counsel, in accordance with his will, which he is what he actively desires to happen and actively works to bring about.

As we saw more closely last week, what God's plan is for us is that we become conformed to the image of his Son. His plan, which he started to bring about even before he created the world, is to make us more like Jesus. He chose to save us and he predestined, or arranged all the circumstances that would lead to our salvation. When we believed and trusted in him and in his gospel, he sealed us with his Spirit who will be with us forever. The presence and activity of the Spirit of God is to transform our hearts and our minds. The effect of this inner transformation is that our behavior will soon begin to match that inner reality.

This is the work of God in Christ through his Spirit. *This is our salvation.* The result of our salvation, of God's work in us to bring about his purposes of making us like Christ, is the praise of his glory. When the Son of God became one of us one of the things he accomplished was to show us what it means to be genuinely human. True humanity is seen in humans fulfilling their purpose of reflecting the glory of God. When we become more like Jesus by being transformed from the inside out, the result is the praise of his glory.

We have the Spirit who comes to make us truly human, that we might fulfill our purpose in this world. That purpose is to glorify God in Christ by his Spirit. This work is God's work, from beginning to end. Our part is to surrender to this truth, to believe it, to let it sink its tendrils deep into our hearts where it begins its work in us. Our part is to rest in the truth of the gospel. Here we must sit. Only by first sitting in the truth can we ever truly live for him.

True change is always a response to the First Mover. There are those who will tell you how to behave, and will gladly provide you a list of rules to follow. They will tell you to be a good example, which really means don't let anyone think poorly of you. They will tell you to avoid sins—at least the ones that are outwardly visible. They will tell you to avoid the things that will make you feel bad, whether lying or cheating or stealing. It's about avoidance, after all.

The problem with these is God is not the one who receives the glory. When you control your behavior, that's what you're doing. The truth is you can be a morally upright person

apart from the Holy Spirit, while inwardly just as filled with death and decay as someone whose sins are more evident. Jesus called such people “white-washed tombs”. Outwardly they appear nice but inside they are full of death.

The promises of God are brought to us by his Spirit who begins his work on the inside, where death and decay once reigned. He brings new life where there had been no life, and as he continues to work in us, this inner life begins “leaking out” into our behavior. Then, and only then, is God glorified for this type of transformation can only come from the Lord. One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture says this.

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

It is when we see Jesus, that is, when we see the truth of God in Christ, when we rest in that truth, sitting at the feet of Jesus, that we are truly transformed. The result of this transformation that comes from the Lord who is the Spirit is the praise of his glory.