Chosen and Sealed

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 1:3-14

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“Who do you think you are?” The inflection in the question makes all the difference. We are not asking, “so, who do you think you are?” The emphasis falls on the word “think.” Who do you think you are?

Ephesians will be our text this fall in answering this question. Ephesians concerns itself with identity and purpose. Identity deals with “Who am I?” Purpose addresses “Why am I here?”

Last Sunday, I invited you to read Ephesians. As I issued this challenge, I thought to myself, they are not going to do this.

Why don’t we read our Bibles? I identified five reasons: I don’t read much anymore. The Bible confuses me. It is not relevant to my life. It makes me uncomfortable. I don’t have time. I asked this question to staff this week and several put the question out on Facebook. One comment was instruct-\n\nional for me: “I struggle to sit long enough to settle into a receiving receptive mindset. I am so accustomed to process quick bits of information that I am impatient with reading that takes so much effort to understand.”

I study the Bible for you each Sunday in my role as a preacher, yet I rarely talk about how I study it. Today, as I walk through this passage with you, I will talk about how to read the Bible.

First, I need a Bible. I would advise a modern translation, to take advantage of recent Biblical scholarship. I prefer the New International Version, yet there are many translations from which to choose. The Bible does not read like a novel. It does not read smoothly from cover to cover. The Bible does not roll out in strict chronological order.
I center my reading in prayer. I ask God to speak to me through His Word. I am not reading the Bible primarily for information, but for formation. God the Holy Spirit uses Scripture to form Christ in me.

I read the passage the first time to become familiar with it. Then, I go back and reread it more slowly. I look at its overall flow. I take note of words and phrases that reoccur. I am careful not to read my prejudices into the text. I want to adopt an attitude of openness and receptivity.

I ask two questions of the text. First, what did this passage mean to its original recipients? You do not need to know Greek or Hebrew to understand the Bible. You do not need to amass a library of resources to read it. A one-volume study Bible will suffice to give you general background of the text. Once I have discovered what the text meant “then and there,” I can make application to my own life in the “here and now.” We ask the same so-what question of scripture that I ask in every sermon I preach.

We turn now to today’s passage in Ephesians 1:3-14. Ephesians is an epistle that follows a customary first century letter-writing pattern. It identifies the sender (Paul) and the recipients (believers in Ephesus) right from the outset (1:1). Paul then moves into a greeting (grace and peace to you (1:2) that flows into thanksgiving and prayer for his readers. Yet, before this thanksgiving and prayer, Paul inserts a blessing into his letter: “Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing” (1:3). Incidentally, this blessing is very Jewish on Paul’s part since every observant Jew prayed three times daily a series of 18 blessings or benedictions.

Several words and phrases repeat in verses 3-14. Repetition is the Bible’s way of underlining. “Blessing”
appears three times. The words “chose,” “predestine” and “redemption” each occur twice. The prepositional phrase “In Christ” or alternatively “In him” repeats eleven times. Two phrases repeat three times each—“according to this good pleasure” and “to the praise of his glory.”

Now, for flow—each member of the Trinity is present and accounted for in this passage. Paul singles out God the Father at the beginning. He shifts to Jesus the Son in the middle verses and concludes with the Holy Spirit. The phrase “to the praise of his glory” appears at the end of each Father, Son and Holy Spirit reference to accentuate the Trinitarian impact of this passage (1:6, 12, 14).

I titled this first section, Chosen by the Father, since “chose” is the primary verb in verses 3-6. Paul uses a related word, predestination, in verse 5. He comes back to these same two words, “chosen” and “predestination” later in verse 11.

I’ve had this running debate with myself over the years—did I choose Christ or did Christ choose me? My decision to follow Jesus seemed a conscious choice in my early years. I decided to follow Jesus. Yet, now as I look back on my religious awakening, I doubt I would have come to Jesus had he not awakened me. I was minding my own business in college, having a good time when Christ became real to me. I chose Christ but I doubt I would have chosen him had he not sought me out.

This is a picture of my grandfather’s farm. The barn had a metal track that ran across the width of the ceiling. Attached to this track was a pulley, and coming down from the pulley were two ropes, or so it seemed. These ropes tied to a metal fork used to move hay bales for stacking purposes or dropping them to cattle at the basement level. If I stood
below the pulley, there appeared to be two ropes coming down on either side of this pulley. Yet, if I were able to position myself above the pulley, I would discover that what looks like two ropes is in actuality a single rope.

Divine sovereignty and human responsibility, what The Bible calls free will and predestination, look like two ropes from where we are standing. Yet, from God’s vantage point, what looks like two ropes is one rope after all. I choose Christ; he chooses me.

In the middle portion, verses 7-12, Jesus the Son receives primary focus. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (1:7). Chosen by the Father and redeemed by the Son. The prepositional phrase, “in him” repeats often in this middle section. The preposition “in” communicates location. Christ is in me just as I am in Christ. Redemption is an Old Testament word used to convey God’s deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt. Redemption means to buy back or purchase by means of a ransom. The New Testament utilizes this word to express what Jesus does for us. He purchases our salvation at considerable cost to himself, namely his blood sacrifice. Jesus offers his life as payment for our sins. He does for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Lou Johnson languished in the minor leagues for years before he became an everyday outfielder for the Los Angeles Dodgers. When Dodgers star Tommy Davis went down with a broken ankle, Sweet Lou got the call. He played in 131 games for the Dodgers in 1965 and batted 260 with 12 home runs. In the seventh game of the World Series, Lou hit a deciding home run. He played four more years in the major leagues. Lou’s cocaine and alcohol addiction intensified after baseball. To support his habit, Lou sold all his baseball memorabilia, including his World Series ring.
When he turned sober, Lou became a goodwill ambassador for the Dodgers. In 2005, his ring turned up for sale on the internet. Lou longed to have his ring back but he could not afford to buy it. When the Dodger organization heard about it, they bought it for him. The Dodgers did for Lou what he could not do for himself. Christ does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He redeems us. He pays the ransom.

The last two verses of this passage feature the Holy Spirit (1:13-14). Chosen by the Father, Redeemed by the Son and Sealed by the Spirit. “When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit who is our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.”

In the early 1980s, seven people in Chicago died after taking Tylenol capsules laced with poisonous cyanide. Johnson & Johnson pulled 31 million bottles of Tylenol from drug stores and supermarkets and installed a tamper-proof seal to protect consumers from foul play. In like manner, the Holy Spirit seals us.

There you have it, folks. Chosen by the Father, Redeemed by the Son and Sealed with the Spirit. So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? Three suggestions come to mind.

First, read Ephesians this week. If you read it last week, reread it. If you missed the invitation or need a do-over, consider this sermon to be your invitation. Not only will this letter positively influence your life, it will start you on the road of regular daily Bible reading and centering each day in prayer. I talked about creating new habits last Sunday. It takes about two months to create a new habit.
Second, live with less attitude and more gratitude for God’s gift of salvation this week. Our English Bibles divide this paragraph into eight sentences of 12 verses. There were no verses or punctuation markings in the original Bible. Scribes added them in the 7th century AD to improve readability. Be glad; be very glad. In the original Greek version, verses 3-14 consist of a single sentence of 202 Greek words—the longest sentence in Scripture. You talk about run-on sentences. What you need to know is that Paul dictated most of his letters. He often adds a sentence or two at the end to validate his letter along the lines of, “I am Paul and I approve this letter.” If Paul dictated Ephesians, I doubt his concern was sentence structure or length. The enormity of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ washes over Paul in a burst of praise and thanksgiving.

The whole sweep of salvation history is contained in this one sentence. “God the Father…chose us from the creation of the world.” What a staggering thought. So much for being a blip on the cosmic screen. “In him we have redemption” shifts to present tense. We have redemption right now, at this very moment. “You were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,” points to the future. The Spirit is the first installment of our future inheritance as God’s people. Past, present and future—chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son and sealed by the Spirit.

Third, if you have never received God’s gift of salvation in Jesus Christ, do so now. The Dodgers did for Lou Johnson what he could never do for himself. Jesus does for you what you can never do for yourself. Come to Jesus.