

Ephesians 1. 3-14 (St. Michael's – Jan. 3, 2021)

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Well, Hallelujah for 2021! Have we ever looked forward to a New Year with more hope and relief? At last 2020 is behind us! And yet, as I've reflected on this past year, I've also come to realize that it really wore me out.

Being in lockdown for months. The uncertainty of vaccines and toilet paper, the chaos of political elections. Having friends in quarantine. You know, I had a remarkably *easy* year comparatively – I'm healthy, I have a job—and yet even for me, 2020 was exhausting.

And so as I approach 2021 I've been thinking about the question – how can I begin well? How can I begin this year with hope and peace, and in the strength of the Lord? Even in the midst of ongoing uncertainty. Because of course there's no guarantee 2021 will be any better than 2020. It could well be worse. So how can I begin this year faithfully, *regardless* of the circumstances?

Paul, begins his letter to the Ephesians by giving us three foundational truths that equip us to face virtually *anything*.

In fact, Paul is so excited about these three truths that he waxes poetic, and he gives us here the longest sentence in the entire Bible. Paul is so excited that he goes on and on...What are these truths? Simply that every Christian is...

1. Chosen by God
2. Redeemed by Christ
3. Sealed by the Holy Spirit

It's so simple. And yet, if we actually believe Paul—if we internalize these truths—we'll have an unshakeable resilience. Paul is living proof. As he writes this he's been in prison for three years. And yet, he's filled with uncontainable joy.

Number one, we're chosen by God. Paul writes in verse 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, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world.'* Despite his incarceration, Paul praises God for *choosing us* before the foundation of the world.

Have any of you ever been chosen? For a promotion, an award, even for a sports team? There's something deep in the human heart that longs to be chosen. I regularly play frisbee golf with a bunch of guys. And sometimes we pick teams. And I hate to admit it, but when I'm picked first I feel really good. And when I'm picked last I feel bad.

The fact is, I *really* want to be chosen. I want to be in the group and not on the outside. I want the right people to like me and approve of me. And if I'm honest, not just with frisbee golf, but with everything. As CS Lewis observed *'In all of our lives, one of the dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring [or group, as well as] the terror of being left outside.'*

Yes, we all have a deep longing to be chosen. And yet, the truth is that even if we are chosen by the right people, it *doesn't ultimately satisfy*, because there will always be that anxiety - if I lose my frisbee skills, I'll no longer be wanted. If I lose my attractiveness my spouse won't love me. If I don't keep up-to-date, my colleagues won't respect me. This is the precariousness of mere human choosing.

But notice the contrast with God. His choosing is not temporary, it's permanent. And it's not for a team, but for His family. Verse 5, '*In love he predestined us for adoption as sons.*'

The Bible teaches that human beings, by nature, are spiritual orphans. Disconnected from God, from meaning and security. And, being an orphan, even in the natural world, is a horrific plight. There are 150 million orphans in the world today. But the Bible tells us that by nature we are *all* spiritual orphans – without God and adrift in this world.

We see this orphan spirit all around us in the desperate ways people try to find meaning and security. And we see it in Paul's day. You know, Ephesus was the world's capital of astrology. The main religion of the city was the cult of Artemis. Her temple was 120 feet tall, covered in gold and silver. One of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. And within was the great statue of the goddess herself, wearing the zodiac across her chest. A magnificent, yet heartbreaking symbol of how spiritually orphaned people try to find meaning and security.

But the Good News is that in a world of sin, of brokenness and insecurity, God chose us—*God chose you*—from before the creation of the world, to be his son or daughter. Not because you'd done anything to deserve it, but simply because He loves you.

Notice the words '*In love he predestined us.*' The word predestine is used only six times in the NT, twice here in the passage. It's a mysterious concept and often debated. But the one thing that's *absolutely clear*, is the qualifying phrase. '*In love,*' '*In love God predestined us.*'

God chose you not grudgingly, not randomly, not with detached objectivity, but out of love. Jesus, in one of his parables gives a remarkable image of what the Father's love looks like. Luke 15. '*And the son arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.*' My friends, do you believe that God loves you like that? That when you get to heaven the Father will be running to meet you, to embrace you, to kiss your face?

You know, if we truly believe this, we will have an unshakeable security. So that *when* we're excluded and shunned and ostracized and fired and disowned, we can still live with courage and poise.

Because at the end of the day, if we're chosen by the King, who cares what the peasants say? If we're loved by the bridegroom, who cares what the wedding guests think? And being chosen by God is the one thing in this universe that has the *density* to be an anchor for the human soul.

Paul now moves into the second great truth. We're redeemed by Christ. Verse 7: *'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.'*

So we believe God loves us. But many religions say God is love. Even the New Age says God is love in an ethereal and ambiguous way. So what exactly does Paul mean when he talks about love? What does it look like?

This is where Paul goes next. And it looks a lot like today's Gospel passage. *'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'* Out of love the Creator entered his Creation. The playwright wrote himself into His play. God became one of us.

And Jesus' coming was not simply a visitation, but a rescue mission. *'In him we have redemption through his blood.'*

You see, one of the remarkable features of God's love is that it's persistent and relentless. And so even when we rebelled against God. Even when we tried to live our lives our way. Even when our selfishness led us to a wasteland of suffering and bondage, He didn't stop loving us. My favorite children's Bible describes God's love this way *'His never-stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love.'*

It was *this* kind of love which drove Jesus to the cross. It was *this* love which allowed him to endure the flaying of his flesh, the mocking, the laughing, the spitting, the goading. Jesus could have said, 'I'm done with this,' and called 10,000 angels to crush his enemies...but He didn't. Because it wasn't the nails that held Jesus on that wood, it was love.

The writer of Hebrews says, *'It was for the joy set before him that Jesus endured the cross.'* Have you ever wondered, 'what was the joy that motivated Jesus?' You know, it must have been a joy he didn't have with His Father in heaven. So what could it have been? Tim Keller notes that there was only one thing Jesus didn't have in heaven. And that was us. A relationship with us. And on the cross he gave everything for the joy of bringing us home.

And so for any believers who are struggling—who are discouraged or depressed, maybe thinking 'I'm not good enough'—remember this, Jesus paid the price for all your sins. And he did it for the joy of sharing His life with you forever.

Yes, chosen by God, redeemed by the Christ. These promises may sound too good to be true, and so Paul closes with his third great truth, verse 13 *'You were sealed with the Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance.'* Yes, the Holy Spirit is the guarantee that all of this is true. The Holy Spirit is God's deposit or down payment.

It's as if you had a dream, the best dream you'd ever had in your life. And in that dream you experienced the most glorious things. The most delicious food. The best wine. The most beautiful sights. Imagine waking up and feeling the crushing disappointment that it was *only* a dream. But then feeling something in your hand and realizing that somehow, you still have part of that other world with you. It *was* real. It *is* real!

The Holy Spirit in our lives is a reminder that all of this is real. And so when we doubt, the Holy Spirit reminds us of the truth. As Paul writes in Romans '*The Spirit bears witness to our spirit that we are children of God.*' And as the Holy Spirit moves in our lives, warming our hearts with God's Word, transforming our character and producing the fruit of the Spirit, we can take heart and remember, it's all true. This other world is true. The choosing of God, the redeeming of Christ.

In a funny way, the Gospel means that all of those strange astrological myths and fairy tales people have looked to for meaning, are actually true. There *is* a beauty who loved us and changed us from a beast. There *is* a prince who fought dragons to wake us from sleep. The Holy Spirit is the guarantee that all these stories that so deeply move our hearts, are true, and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. As CS Lewis wrote, '*Those ancient myths, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophesy.*' And a living relationship with the Holy Spirit is the guarantee.

And here, in closing, I want to offer one bit of practical counsel. You may be wondering—all of this is so wonderful and I believe it in my head, but I don't really feel it in my heart. How can I activate these truths in a way where my life is changed? Let me suggest that the key to activating spiritual truth is *friendship*.

Because the sobering reality is, if you come to church on Sunday, but go through the week without a spiritual friend, it's very unlikely that you will grow spiritually. You may get inspired occasionally, but it won't last.

Because what we really need is a friend to help us work these truths into our lives. All of these verses in Ephesians are addressed in the *plural*. Paul expects his readers to be walking together, to be meeting together, to *activate* these truths. It's like when you're baking a cake – you don't simply pour the ingredients in a pan and throw it in the oven. That would be a disaster. No, you need to mix up the ingredients and work them in together, and THEN put it in the oven. Friendship is the holy mixing that works these truths into our lives.

And this is why church is important. We've been chosen, redeemed, sealed, and placed in a community where we can help each other on the way. This is what we were made for.

And so if there were one New Year's resolution I would invite you to pray for and pursue in 2021, it would be to find a spiritual friend, the mixing bowl of God. That you would connect with someone you can pray with, read the Word with, confess your sins with, and in so doing, activate the power of God in your life. Let's pray.

Gracious Lord, thank you for choosing us, redeeming us, and sealing us by your Spirit. As we begin a new year, give us grace to find spiritual friends who can help us to work these truths in our lives, that we can be witnesses of hope and joy to the world, for Jesus' sake. Amen.