



“In Christ” **August 8, 2021**

Ephesians 1:3-14

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Today we begin a new sermon series called “In Christ.” Just for funsies, you can keep a tally of all the times I say “in Christ.” Spoiler alert: it’s a lot! Throughout this series we will journey through the Letter to the Ephesians. The focal verse for this series is one that we already read today: *“This is what God planned for the climax of all times: to bring all things together in Christ, the things in heaven along with the things on earth.”* The phrase “in Christ” is used in a variety of places in the Letter to the Ephesians. As Christians, our identity is found in Christ. During this series, we will discover what it means for us as individuals and as a community to be in Christ and how that shapes our identity and lives. Our passage for today paints broad brush strokes of what it means to be in Christ. In fact, this set of verses is often considered a “eulogy.” It praises God for what God has done in Christ. The praise is effusive, yet the appropriate response for all of the blessings conferred to us. What are these blessings and what do they mean for our daily life?

First of all, it is easy to get lost in the theological weeds, per se, with this passage. In fact, in the original Greek this passage was one entire sentence! Depending on the translation you read, it is still replete with run-on sentences. The CEB breaks it up a bit and makes the content a little bit more digestible and understandable. The author of Ephesians is lifting praise upon praise for Christ, which is appropriate and necessary. But the author also raises several deep, theological concepts.

The overarching theme of this passage is that God has chosen us in Christ. God is the primary mover and the one who has taken initiative in all of this. That is a demonstration of God’s prevenient grace- God working and pouring out grace to us before we have any impulse to respond. Even before the creation of all the world, God had already chosen us. And of course there is theological debate over what exactly it means to be chosen- we can go down the rabbit trail of predestination and divine election at another time- but before we had the opportunity to choose God, God chose us. God pours out love and grace upon us and desires that we would be in a right relationship with God. We are, after all, God’s good creation. Very good creation, at that. But we are not chosen just for the sake of making us feel good and like we belong somewhere. It is not like being the last to be chosen for the dodgeball team during gym in elementary school- I know what that feels like, by the way. No, God chooses us all *in Christ*. In Christ is the key for us in this sermon and in this sermon series. This passage lists the many blessings that we receive in Christ.

If you are a grammar nerd and enjoy good subordinate participial and prepositional clauses, this passage is for you! Did you catch all of the blessings from the reading of the scripture lesson? Here are all of the blessings in Christ listed in this passage:

- We are blessed in Christ
- Chosen in Christ
- Adopted through Christ
- Ransomed through Christ
- We are all brought together in Christ
- We receive our inheritance in Christ
- We hope in Christ
- Hear truth in Christ
- Believe in Christ

All of this tells us something about ourselves as Christians. None of these are things we accomplish on our own or even as a group. But most importantly, it tells us about Jesus Christ. It is all because of, in, and through Christ! This tells us that as Christians our identity and very lives are found in Christ. Christ is the source of it all.

We see in verse 4 “God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless in God’s presence before the creation of the world.” God chose us in Christ that we would be holy and blameless in God’s presence. Being holy means that we are set

apart for God. Our lives are set apart and dedicated to God. In a word, we are different. You will recognize that as Christians God does not take us out of the world. We are called to live, work, and serve in the world. We experience the same hurts, struggles, challenges, and difficulties as everyone else. We are not immune to the ramifications of sin and death in this world. However, God makes us different within it. This is important. God does not take us out of the world but makes us different within it. Christians should be identifiable in the world. The way we act, speak, and behave should be discernably different. As Christians, our identity is rooted in Christ. As such, we should live in the way that Christ lived. We should care about the things Christ cared about. We should love the people Christ loved. As Christians we should be among the first (if not the first) to raise the banner of social justice. We should be the ones welcoming the lost, the broken, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the marginalized, the outcast. We are called to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and those in prison. Why? Because we are following in the example of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! As Christians we do what Christ did. There really should not be any debate about loving our neighbor, but I know the debate exists. We get into the nitty gritty of who our neighbor actually is. And you know what? Jesus commanded us to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. If Jesus didn't specify, I don't think we need to worry about the specifics, either. Love God and love your neighbor. Make Christ known by the way you live your life!

Imagine how we could revolutionize society and the world around us if we actually followed the gospel call to be holy and follow after God. Imagine if we lived our lives for Christ, discernably so! Imagine what it would look like to be people known for their love, joy, peace, kindness, self-control. I cannot fathom the transformation that is possible through people who live their lives rooted in Christ, people who allow their entire lives to be shaped by Christ. Our identity is in, or at least should be in, Christ. Do we live like that is the truth?

We are in Christ. The beauty of this is that it is freely available to all people. Verses 9-10 read "God revealed his hidden design to us, which is according to his goodwill and the plan that he intended to accomplish through his Son.¹⁰ This is what God planned for the climax of all times: to bring all things together in Christ, the things in heaven along with the things on earth." This particular translation uses "hidden design" but other translations use the word "mystery." At any rate, God has revealed something to us through Jesus Christ. God had a plan. God always has a plan, even when we cannot see it. It's good to know someone is keeping it all together. And this is the plan: to bring all things together in Christ, the things in heaven along with the things on earth. The mystery, or hidden design, is this: the gospel is open to all people. Initially, the Israelites were God's chosen people. But in Jesus Christ a new covenant was made. Through Christ's death and resurrection, a new way was opened up for all people. Jesus Christ himself torn down the barrier wall that divides us and we are all united in Christ. "In Jesus God has revealed that his love and care, grace and mercy, are meant not only for Jews but the entire world."¹ We are all God's chosen people. God chooses all of us, and yet we can decide to not choose God in response. However, the invitation and welcome always stand ready. The gospel is freely available to all in Christ.

It might seem hard to believe that all things are being brought together in Christ. It certainly does not look like it most of the time, right? If anything, it would seem as though we are being torn further apart! Perhaps our view is too limited. This Letter to the Ephesians, as well as the Letter to the Colossians, speaks to the cosmic nature of Christ. Christ is eminent, present here with us and dwelling in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, and yet Christ is transcendent. Christ is above us and above all things. Colossians 1:17b affirms that Christ is holding all things together. Christ has power and authority over all things. And we only see the snippet of time in which we live. However, as Christians we believe that history is the working out of the will of God. Those who believe in Christ find ourselves participating in God's plan and will. This does not mean to say that everything that happens is God's will, absolutely not, but that throughout the course of history we are getting closer and closer to God's plan of unity. God will gather everything into one in Jesus Christ and has already started doing so.

And that gives us hope. That gives us hope that one day everything will be restored and just as God desires for it to be. We will no longer see war. We will no longer see division. We will no longer see brokenness and destruction of lives and creation. We set our hope in Christ. Christ brings us a perspective that is beyond the here and right now. In Christ we know that there is so much more, that there is potential, hope, and the promise for what we cannot yet see. We live in the tension of the now and the not yet. This passage affirms that we have a salvation that is both enjoyed here in the present and will be fully realized in the future. We set our hope in Christ as we wait.

¹ Daily Study Bible: Ephesians, 84.

The last few verses of this passage really drive several of these points home: *We have also received an inheritance in Christ. We were destined by the plan of God, who accomplishes everything according to his design.*¹² *We are called to be an honor to God's glory because we were the first to hope in Christ.*¹³ *You too heard the word of truth in Christ, which is the good news of your salvation. You were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit because you believed in Christ.*¹⁴ *The Holy Spirit is the down payment on our inheritance, which is applied toward our redemption as God's own people, resulting in the honor of God's glory.*

First off, God will accomplish everything God sets out to do. God has a plan and will see it through. We can trust in God's good plan for us and the world because we know who God is and what God is about. This passage pours forth praise for God's blessings upon us in Christ, God's love, God's mercy, compassion, and grace. God calls us to participate in God's mission and plan, but God is the one who will work it all out.

Second, we see the term inheritance used a couple of different times in those select verses I read. We have received an inheritance in Christ and the Holy Spirit is the down payment of that inheritance we have in Christ. These are concepts that a lot of us are familiar with. Many people receive an inheritance of some sort when their parents or other relatives pass away. Many of us have made a large purchase that required a down payment, such as a house or a vehicle. We receive this inheritance because we are children of God. Verse 5 affirms "God destined us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ because of his love." Because we are adopted into God's family through Christ, we are the recipients of this divine inheritance. We have a concept of what an inheritance is, but what is interesting is that the Greek word here, *ἐκκληρώθην (eklerothēn)*, means to be chosen, to be obtained, or to possess. Again we circle back to the idea that we are chosen by God in Christ. God chooses us and pours out blessings and grace upon us because God loves us. The Holy Spirit is the down payment on this inheritance. This means that we receive the benefits of being in Christ right now but we are guaranteed the full payment in the future. The Holy Spirit secures the entirety of what is promised to us. What we are given now is a foretaste of what we are promised for eternity. We are sealed with the Holy Spirit because we believe in Christ. Think of it literally, in terms of a sticker or visible marking on an object. It identifies what that item is and who it belongs to. Likewise, being sealed with the Holy Spirit shows that we belong to God. The Holy Spirit empowers us to know God's will and live out our identity in Christ. As mentioned earlier in this message, this makes us identifiable to the world. The Holy Spirit living in us transforms us and shapes us and cultivates the Christ-like behaviors that followers of Christ are called to emulate.

Given the chance, this passage will make your head spin! The author of Ephesians has a lot to say about what it means to be in Christ, about what Christ has done on our behalf. It can be hard to absorb it all! Not only because the concepts can feel lofty, but because it can be hard to believe that God loves us so deeply that God would do all of this for us. I don't know about you, but I was brought into sharp awareness of my humanity and limitations in comparison to the abundance of what God can do and has done. I cannot save myself, neither can you, but Christ has saved us and set us free. Christ has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. In Christ we find forgiveness, hope, abundant blessings, and belonging. We find our identity in Christ, meaning Christ is the lens through which we make decisions, view ourselves and others, and interact with the world. We are in Christ. This is an identity that is strong and secure, as well as life-giving. We are in Christ, the one in whom we live and breathe and move. May our lives be anchored in Christ, the one who loves us and makes all things possible. Amen.