

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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**Broadcast Date:** 22 November 1998

**No.** T0033

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## The Epistle to the Ephesians: Ephesians 1:1-14 - The Will of God

### Introduction

In the next few weeks, we plan to look at Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. It will be helpful if we begin by a brief introduction to the Epistle.

In the address of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesian elders as recorded in Acts 20:17-38, he reminded them of the truths he had taught them when with them. Among the many things he said was, "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Although the Apostle did not write the Epistle to the Ephesians until he was a prisoner in Rome, yet these words "the counsel of God" form a very fitting heading to the Epistle. This Epistle is therefore one of the "Prison Epistles".

Another subject taught in this Epistle is "The Mystery", that is Christ and the Church. This is at the heart of Paul's teaching. It is developed in Ephesians 3 very fully. We must also remember that the Ephesians were Gentiles. The letter therefore brings out Paul's place as being the Apostle to the Gentiles. This Epistle presents Christianity at its highest level.

- Ephesians 1 tells of God's purpose before the foundation of the world, also that the Christian's blessings are in Christ.
- Ephesians 2 describes the work of the three Persons of the Godhead carrying out His purpose.
- Ephesians 3 as we have already pointed out, the subject is Christ and the Church.
- Ephesians 4 and 5 are the practical part of the Epistle.
- Ephesians 6 considers the matter of Christian conflict and the armour needed to be conquerors.

### God pleases Himself

Our theme for today is "The Will of God". This is developed in Ephesians 1:4-14. The will of God is a very large subject. Much is said about it in the Bible. We may give more thought to this theme in relation to our manner of life. In Romans 12:2 we learn that the will of God is "good, and acceptable, and perfect". We will of course prove it to be so by doing it. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3 we are told, "This is the will of God, even our sanctification", that is, our practical sanctification. One more example may suffice. In the same Epistle the writer says "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God..." (1 Thessalonians 5:18). But in Ephesians 1 we must view the will of God apart from our responsibility. Here it is God's sovereign will. It is His will in respect of His good pleasure. Some years ago I remember listening to an address on Ephesians 1 and the speaker put it very simply, "In this chapter, God pleases Himself." This seemed to me to be right.

### God's Will

There are three expressions used in Ephesians 1 with regard to the will of God. This is helpful because they divide up Ephesians 1:1-14 very easily. They are as follows:

1. The good pleasure of His will (Ephesians 1:4-7)
2. The mystery of His will (Ephesians 1:8-10)
3. The counsel of His own will (Ephesians 1:11-14)

Before dealing with the sections indicated above, attention must be drawn to Ephesians 1:3. It seems that, as the Apostle thinks over what he is about to say, he is overtaken by its greatness. There is a spontaneous outburst of worship; he could not contain himself. Let us consider his expression, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). The word "Blessed" means "speak well of". This is an outflow of worship to Him who is the source of all blessing. The way in which God is referred to here is worth a thought, for as we make our way through these opening verses of the epistle we will find that He has become God and Father to us. This is true Christianity. The blessings we are in possession of, as Christians, are not temporal but spiritual. Neither are they earthly but heavenly. The blessings of Israel are

temporal and earthly. In the Old Testament, we learn how God promised them the land of Canaan (Exodus 3:8); they shall have it in full measure in a future day. But it was the spiritual blessings possessed by Christians now that led the writer to worship. As we meditate upon these verses this should be our response also.

### **The Good Pleasure of His Will (Ephesians 1:4-7).**

Let us think upon some of these spiritual blessings found in these four verses. The first one is "Chosen us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4) This is true of every individual believer. Long before any of us came into the world, indeed before the world began, this Divine choice was made. It was in Christ. When we came into this world we were "in Adam" with its sad consequences (1 Corinthians 15:22). It is as individuals we have been chosen "in Christ". The results of this choosing is "that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love." This is what we speak of as "positional blessing". It is true now. Of course we should be this in a practical sense also. In the day to come, it will be ours in perfection. The practical exhortations may come out at the end of this Epistle but, for the moment, let us wonder and give God all the praise for all He has made us. One thing more: there are two words to be noted, "before Him". That is, for His own pleasure.

Let us think now of Ephesians 1:5. "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will". Christians are often a little apprehensive in dealing with this subject. We must however face up to it. It will be better understood if we re-phrase it by saying, "marked us out beforehand." In our consideration of Ephesians 1:4, we said that each believer has been chosen in Christ personally. But predestination has more to do with the place which each believer is marked out to fill. In our verse, this place is adoption or, better still, described as sonship. The thought of children hardly fits in with adoption, so other translations render the verse, "marked us out beforehand for adoption." These verses are so full we cannot miss anything out. The blessing could never have been ours apart from Jesus Christ and all He has done in making God known. There are two other words we must not miss, "to Himself." Christians have been given this relationship in order that God might have a response from us. Twice over in Paul's other letters we are told that we "have been given the Spirit of adoption whereby we cry, Abba Father" (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:5-6).

In Ephesians 1:6 the truth is acceptance. "To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he has made us accepted in the Beloved." The word "accepted" may have a cold ring about it. Another way of rendering the passage could be "taken us into favour in the Beloved." Notice it is not here, "in Christ" but "in the Beloved." There is an intimacy and nearness about this relationship. We would have considered it a wonderful thing if the term had been "with the Beloved." However, it says "in the Beloved." This is union and means that the Father's love which the Son enjoys is also ours to enjoy. The youngest believer is one with Him who is the Son. Truths such as these are not easy to expound. We should be thankful for hymn writers who have had the ability to put their thoughts into words and thus help us in our understanding. One example is as follows,

*"So dear, so very dear to God,  
More dear I cannot be;  
The love wherewith He loves the Son,  
Such is His love to me."*

Captain Catesby Paget (1804-1878)

There is a predominant theme going through Ephesians 1:6 and that is praise and response. Listen: "To the praise of the glory of His grace." This last expression, "glory of His grace" does not emphasise so much our need, but His good pleasure towards us.

Let us go on further, this time to Ephesians 1:7. Note that there is a difference of expression here. In this verse it is "the riches of his grace." Why the change? It is now a matter of our need. What a dreadful condition we were in before we were redeemed by the blood of Christ. It is not difficult to see why it now says "riches". We were bankrupt sinners with "nothing to pay." If these words are heard today by someone who is not a believer, this is your condition. Material possessions make no difference. Neither does our self-righteousness mean anything; in the language of the parable we may be 50 pence debtors or 500 pence debtors (Luke 7:36-50) - we still have "nothing to pay."

We need the grace of God and the blood of Christ to meet our need. Listen to what Ephesians 1:7 really says, "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of his grace." You may be asking yourself, is it really possible to have the forgiveness of sins? It is indeed! There is a Gospel that proclaims it. It is faith which claims it. Redemption means liberty! You may have it now, the price has been paid. If we have believed, then let us rejoice in such grace.

### **The Mystery of His Will (Ephesians 1:8-10)**

Ephesians 1:4-7 closed with the riches of his grace which brought us the forgiveness of sins. This same grace has “abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence” (Ephesians 1:8). This wisdom is referred to in other scriptures as “the hidden wisdom, now revealed”. Added to this is prudence (or intelligence) so that we may enter into and enjoy the truth now made known. And so the passage continues, “Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to His good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself.” This word “mystery” does not mean something hard to understand, but rather a secret now revealed. There are many mysteries referred to in the New Testament, but this one seems to embrace them all.

The word “dispensation” requires an explanation. It is commonly described as a period of time or an age, but this is not the meaning. The word points to the characteristics of the age. The age we are dealing with here is a future age in which Christ will be the centre, more often than not called the millennium. Let us just think of this wonderful age to come! “That in the dispensation of the fullness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ” (Ephesians 1:10). Everything must be headed up in Him. We remember He was once the centre on the cross, crucified between two malefactors, and it says, “Jesus in the midst” (John 19:18). He was then the object of ridicule and scorn. Does it not cheer your heart that all will be reversed? The Apostle continues, “...both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him” (Ephesians 1:10) This is a universe all headed up in Christ. People around us know nothing of this; how favoured Christians are. God has in His grace let us into His secrets formulated in the Godhead before time began.

### **The Counsel of His own Will (verses 11-14)**

This is the third expression in Ephesians 1 regarding the Will of God. It has to do with an inheritance. Just listen to Ephesians 1:11a: “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance...”. That is, we who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ have an inheritance. There are other scriptures that describe believers as heirs. Here is one of them. “And if children then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17). What is this inheritance? In the previous section of this talk, we learned that Christ is to be the centre of the universe. A well-known hymn puts it as “a universe of bliss” (Thou art the everlasting Word, Josiah Conder, 1789-1855) This then is the inheritance we shall share with Christ. This is God’s purpose for every believer. This may sound unbelievable, but we must take God at His word. There is a practical aspect to this. Through all the circumstances of life, its joys and its sorrows, we, as Christians, are being trained for that day. Worldly wealth means very little compared with this inheritance.

There is a very old hymn written about a woman who lived in very poor circumstances, “in a London garret”. The hymn bears a refrain quoting her expression of faith, “I have Christ, what want I more?” Have you faith like this? Ephesians 1:11 is saying that all is according to God’s purpose. His counsel is the way He works out His purpose. The word “predestinated” is used for the second time in our chapter (Ephesians 1:5, 11). We have been “marked out beforehand” to obtain this inheritance.

Earlier on, in Ephesians 1:6 we were thinking of the words “To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the Beloved”. The focus is on God who has made us accepted. Very much the same form of words is used in Ephesians 1:12. They go like this, “That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ.” The focus this time is upon Christ. It carries on like this, “In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation...” (Ephesians 1:13) The interest in Ephesians 1:11-14 lies in the way the Apostle uses “we” and “ye”.

When he says “we” he is referring to Jews who had trusted Christ, as he himself had. However, the words first trusted in Christ could be rendered “pre-trusted in Christ”. Before the day comes when the whole nation of Israel will trust Christ, there were those who had already trusted Him. When the Apostle says, “In whom ye also trusted”, he has in mind the Ephesians, to whom he was writing, who had believed the gospel. So both Jew and Gentile were on one common ground. This may be the first intimation in the Epistle of Paul’s real object in writing. It was to bring to them the truth of the Church being composed of Jew and Gentile formed into one body.

Paul now goes on to tell these Ephesians about the gift of the Holy Spirit Ephesians 1:13-14. This is something we should be aware of. Having believed the gospel, they had been “...sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise” Ephesians 1:13) This is true of every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ without exception. This is one of the greatest blessings we possess. The things in Ephesians 1:1-14 that we have thought about today could never be understood apart from Him. Neither could there be any response, whether in worship or in practical living, apart from His work within our hearts. The seal of the Spirit marks us out as God’s property. We also learn in this context of the Holy Spirit as the “earnest of our inheritance” (Ephesians 1:14). He is the part-payment, the surety of the whole inheritance being ours.

We end this talk today by referring to the third occasion the words appear “Unto the praise of his glory” - this time connected with the work of the Spirit (Ephesians 1:14). The glory is all due to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus

Christ by whom we have received this gift. The Apostle, who wrote this Epistle, writing about himself, said “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given” (Ephesians 3:8). May we be kept humble, ever thankful for the grace given to us.

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