

FINDING OUR PLACE: AN OVERVIEW

SERIES: FINDING YOUR PLACE IN THE STORY

By Danny Hall

On the wall in my office is a framed prayer. It was my great-great-grandfather's prayer a hundred years ago at a family reunion on Thanksgiving. It was a blessing on the family. One of the things it reminds me of is how very gracious God has been to me, because my story is connected to several generations of people who have known the Lord and have been faithful to him. From time to time I stop and read it as a way of thanking God for putting me in this family.

All of us have a story. Some of us have stories that are really encouraging, and when we think about our families it's a very positive thing. For some, though, thoughts of family and personal stories can bring pain. As the text of our story is being written, we're trying to figure out how to put together a life that matters, perhaps longing for our story to become a happier one than it has been to this point.

In the next few messages we're going to be considering how our stories have their roots in something much greater and grander, and that is the story of God. We're going to be studying the book of Ephesians. We'll see that God has called us to be part of his grand story, and we'll look at what God has done to put us into that story and how it affects our lives day by day.

As we journey through Ephesians, we're going to emphasize certain themes. One important theme in the first half of Ephesians is prayer. In the first three chapters, in almost half of the text Paul is praying. We're going to start looking at that more closely in the next message. Obviously prayer was essential to and a guiding force in the way Paul related to people.

Another theme is spiritual warfare. Paul understood that being part of God's story means you're going to be part of the battle that God is in.

In the latter half of the book, Steve Zeisler is going to talk about some of the practical implications, how we live out our stories as part of God's story. What does it mean in the church, as we use our different spiritual gifts? What does it mean in our families, our marriages and parent-child relationships?

Let me introduce you to the book of Ephesians now. Paul opens with a word of greeting in verses 1-2. Let's look at it briefly:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There's a wealth of information there that we're not going to delve into. In brief, Paul has been called by God as an apostle to take the gospel into new areas deep in the Roman Empire. He greets these believers with a typical greeting: "Grace and peace." This wasn't just "Hi, how are you doing?" Those words express Paul's deep sense of the covenant-love relationship that God has with them.

The letter is addressed to the saints in Ephesus, but in many of the earliest manuscripts there's a blank space where the word "Ephesus" would appear. Scholars have speculated about this, but our best understanding is that this book probably was a circular letter written for a number of churches in and around Ephesus.

Let's look at the next several verses in chapter 1. This is one of the most beautiful passages in all of Paul's writings. Verses 3-14 are actually all one long sentence. Paul starts praising the Lord and he just can't stop. In our English translations it's broken up and punctuated so that it's a little easier to read. But let's draw a deep breath and read through this whole sentence of praise as it pours out of Paul's mind and heart:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption

through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

In this long sentence Paul has covered the entire spectrum of God's salvation history, the whole story of God. I encourage you to read those twelve verses a few times and just allow the glory of what God has done for us to wash over you. Let me give you a few things to think about as you do that.

Spiritual blessings

Paul starts this song of praise in verse 3 with a summation of the glory of this: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.” He’ll unpack this a little bit in the rest of this song of praise, and then even more so through the rest of the book. Note that this is a comprehensive statement of God’s goodness toward us. He has given us everything we need, all spiritual blessings, far beyond what we could ever imagine (Ephesians 3:20). His blessings flow from his very heart.

But notice that these blessings are defined as spiritual blessings. God often gives us other kinds of blessings. Sometimes God prospers us financially, or at least meets our needs day by day. Sometimes he gives us healing and health (yet other times he chooses not to do that). But underneath it all, Paul understands that the real truth about God’s initiative toward us is that he blesses us with every *spiritual* blessing, meaning at the core of our being, not just in our circumstances. God meets every one of our deep needs. These spiritual blessings come through Christ.

In verses 4-6 he gives us a little bit more information about how God has blessed us. (One thing that’s difficult in reading this whole passage is that it has many personal pronouns. Who is “he” and who is “him”? Here’s an easy formula to help you decipher it: When the person referred to by a pronoun is performing the action or doing the work, the pronoun is almost always referring to God the Father. When the person referred to by a pronoun is a description of the way he does it, e.g., “through him,” or “in him,” the pronoun is always referring to Jesus.) Paul focuses on the initiative that God the Father has taken toward us.

The Father's initiative

Verse 4: "For he chose us...." Now, that phrase both excites us and troubles us, doesn't it? God chose us. We're the objects of God's affection and his initiative; he reached down to draw us to himself. That's an incredible thing! But we get tripped up on the idea that God chose us, the so-called doctrine of predestination. If God chose us, then how are we choosing him? Paul refers to our believing in him farther on in this section. The full explanation of God's sovereign choosing of us and our response to his calling is lost in the mystery and the greatness of God. People have struggled for roughly two thousand years to try to explain Paul's formula here. It's beyond us to fully comprehend how the God of the universe from eternity past, before the foundation of the world, could look down the corridors of time into your life and mine, and with his covenant love choose us to be part of his family; and how we could respond to that through faith. The merging of our faith with God's choosing us is a wondrous mystery.

More than that, Paul says, God chose us that we might be holy and blameless before him. These words echo Romans 8:29, where Paul talks about our being called and predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. You see, God didn't choose us to be part of his family only so we could avoid some awful punishment. He also chose us for transformation into the humanity that he originally created us to be. His purposes are to rescue us from the sin that has marred the beauty of his creation, and to restore us to being the kind of people who can enjoy the fullness of life in fellowship with him.

So what we have in verses 4-6 is God's enormous initiative toward us. This picture of God's choosing us to be holy in Christ is about his grace. God has graciously come after us in love, with all of the resources of heaven, to bring us into relationship with himself.

Now in verses 7-10 he takes the next step and explains to us how this has happened.

Redemption through Christ

Verse 7: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins...." This initiative he took toward us, this gracious choosing of us, was accomplished through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. One of the things Paul does here is reach into the language of the exodus. As a Jew steeped in the richness of his own heritage, he would understand the word "redemption" as evocative of the nation's being brought out of slavery in Egypt. (We'll see that unfold even more in verses 11-14.) He says, "There was an exodus when my people were brought out of bondage. But here is a second exodus, if you will, that is even deeper: he has brought us out of the bondage of our sin." Jesus is portrayed as the agent of our salvation and the forgiveness of our sins.

In verse 9 Paul says all of this is in accordance with God's plan that is now being made known, this mystery, which he's going to be talking about throughout the first half of Ephesians. In verse 10 this mystery is that God all along has been working toward one great goal: to raise up a

people for himself from every nation and tribe and tongue, men and women from all backgrounds, a glorious people, and this will one day reach its fullness when everything is placed under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

In the final paragraph, verses 11-14, Paul adds yet another dimension to this whole story.

Sealed with the Holy Spirit

“In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.” What is Paul saying here? First, God is working out the purpose that he always planned, or predestined, from the beginning of time. Then he talks about “we, who were the first to hope in Christ.” Paul is speaking as a Jew. Christ would be the King of the whole world, but he came first to the Jews. Then the gospel message came to the Gentiles. “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.”

Now, notice what God does. “When you believed,” Paul says, “you were sealed with the Holy Spirit.” For Paul there were two great signs that a person was part of the family of God: faith in

Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit in their life. This is a beautiful picture of the people of God. More than that, he says, this Holy Spirit who is given to you is a down payment, a guarantee.

Our son is getting married soon, and a couple of months ago we looked at places where we might host the rehearsal dinner. We finally found a restaurant we really liked and began negotiating with the owner. We went over menus, the schedule, the cost of this and that. We got to the end of the day with everything finalized. But then he wanted some money from us to guarantee that we would show up on that date. So we wrote him a check, a guarantee of the greater payment we would make when it was all done.

That's the idea here. God is guaranteeing our inheritance. All of history is heading toward a time when there's going to be a new heaven and a new earth, and God will be present among his people. Just as the nation of Israel had that little strip of land in Palestine as its inheritance, God has promised that the new earth will be the inheritance of all his people. Looking down the road, Paul says, "That time is surely coming, and here's how I know it's sure: right now God has already given us a little bit of that, which is the Holy Spirit in us. We can fellowship with God and with each other in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit's presence in our lives is the guarantee."

We could spend weeks in this passage, and I have only hit the highlights, hoping to stun you with the magnificence of what God is doing and draw you into an understanding of his story. But let me note a couple of things about what we've just looked at and read together.

Being part of God's story

First, notice Paul's Trinitarian perspective. He speaks of God the Father's initiative toward us, which was accomplished through the work of Christ on the cross, and which is sealed this day through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is an amazing fact that God in all of his fullness, Father, Son, and Spirit, is involved in wrapping his arms around you and me and inviting us into a covenant relationship with him, to participate in the grandest story ever written. Paul reaches into every aspect of the character of God here to let us see the unfolding, transcendent, incredible story of God.

Second, once again notice the overall exodus language. God has called us out from bondage, redeemed us by the blood of Christ and set us free, and is now guiding us by the Holy Spirit toward the Promised Land. There were all kinds of challenges between Egypt and the Promised Land for the Israelites, and that's where you and I are living right now. We've been delivered from bondage, and we're on the road to glory, to the new heaven and the new earth. How did God guide the Israelites on their journey? Remember the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day (Exodus 13:21-22). By these he manifested his presence among them and led them. Paul is saying that this is the Holy Spirit's role in our lives now. The Holy Spirit is God's manifested presence in our lives, taking us toward the goal.

Look how beautifully our personal stories are woven into the transcendent story. Why do you think Paul was so absolutely filled with joy about this? He saw what God had delivered him

from! He had thought he was already in the most important story as a Pharisee. Then he realized he'd gotten the story all wrong. But God graciously brought him out of that and into a personal relationship with himself, and called Paul to be a player in the true story of God. In the same way God has reached out to you and me. The story of my life becomes a paragraph in the larger story of God himself.

Now, if we really believed this, it would have to change the way we looked at life. If our stories are really caught up in the story of God, then why do we worry about so many things that don't matter? Why are we constantly trying to make our way in a different story, the story of this world? Why do we care so much about what we achieve, what we have, or what other people think of us? The God of the universe has energized the totality of his being in an initiative to rescue us from this, to give us something that is life indeed, the true story. My prayer for all of us is that we will revel in the beauty of his weaving of our stories into his.

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Ephesians 1:1-14

First Message

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