

Unified by Choice – Eph. 1

Years ago, we had a lady in our church who did almost everything. We were a very small group back then and this dear woman was our Sunday School teacher, the ladies' Bible study teacher, the bookkeeper, the money-counter, she cleaned the church, she did everything. And she did it well. She was great. I loved her and still do. So, one Sunday morning, I was concerned that she might get burned out and I told her that if she ever needed a break to just let me know.

She looked at me rather angrily and said, *“Do you think I need a break?”* I tried to explain that I didn't think she did but I didn't want her to get burned out because she did so much. But she misunderstood my concern. She got upset and finally she and her husband just left the church. I was shocked.

Sometimes no matter what you say or how you say it, you are going to be misunderstood. Somebody is going to take you out of context or not hear everything you say and they are going to take what they hear and twist it. Or maybe they just focus on the wrong thing. Maybe what they focus on is truth but shouldn't be the point they focus on. Even now, some of you have no idea what I'm trying to say which is a perfect example of what I'm trying to say.

The Apostle Paul had this problem. Poor guy is sitting in a Roman jail writing the book of Ephesians to some good friends who are doing good things and he writes them just to encourage them with good news. I think Paul is writing this in a good mood, unlike how he probably wrote to the Corinthians who were really messing up.

No, Paul starts out this book with good news about how we are blessed as believers in Jesus with all the riches Heaven could offer and we get these things through God's amazing grace! What could possibly go wrong with that message, right? But this passage has become so controversial that some preachers don't want to touch it because it is just an opportunity to divide people in church into one of two camps. And that is the opposite of what I believe Paul intended when he wrote this great book.

We are going to spend a while camped out in the book of Ephesians so go ahead and get out your Bibles. Turn to the New Testament book of **Ephesians** and put a marker there. Ephesians is between **Galatians** and **Philippians** and, like those two books and several other books in the New Testament, it was written by Paul. Paul wrote this while he was in jail in Rome. And he wrote it to the church in Ephesus, not to confront some kind of heresy or to correct some great wrongdoing of theirs. He just wanted to encourage them and I feel like if Paul were writing to Christ Fellowship today, this would be similar to what he would write.

This was written to let the church know what a church was supposed to look like and all through it is encouragement to be unified. A unified church is an alive church. It is a God-honoring, Bible-believing and Spirit-filled church full of like-minded people. They don't always think the same and don't act the same or look just alike. But none of that should keep a church from being unified. Let's look at chapter one today and get through the controversial stuff right off the bat.

When I read the first chapter of Ephesians, I get happy. It gives me joy and peace and I just like to read it over and over and just roll around in it and get it all over me and eat it all up! Taste and see that the Lord is good! (**Psalm 34:8**) That's what I say when I read **Ephesians 1**. Do you know what I don't say? I don't say, "Thank the Lord for John Calvin" nor do I say, "God bless Jacobus Arminius." But evidently some people do because this great passage and others like it have been mistakenly dividing people into the two camps of Calvinism and Arminianism for way too long.

Calvinism simply says that God chose who will be saved and who goes to Heaven because He is sovereign. Arminianism simply says that man can choose to be saved or choose to go to Hell. Now, that is way too simplistic for a discussion that Plato and Aristotle couldn't figure out nor has the most educated theological scholar of our day. So, sit back and relax and enjoy Paul's beautiful greeting and encouragement to his friends in Ephesus as we read **Ephesians chapter 1, verses 1-14**.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: ² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ 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. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. ¹¹ 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, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit

guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Years ago, a young family asked me to join them for lunch at their house after church. They were thinking about joining the church and wanted to get to know me and the church better so what better way than over some homemade fried chicken and mashed potatoes with all the trimmings?

They had a big family and so when I got there after church the house was just buzzing with activity getting everything ready for lunch. We finally sat down and asked the blessing and the food was being passed and out of the blue the dad asked me, “*So, Todd, where do you stand on election and predestination?*” I thought that was a strange topic of conversation so early in the meal but I answered something along the lines of how I know we have free will and yet I know God chose us because He knew before the earth was created if we would choose Him or not. Pass the potatoes please.

Well, evidently that was the wrong answer because the whole family just stared at their plates in uncomfortable silence for the longest time. Conversation was strained the rest of the meal and as soon as it was over they thanked me for coming and I left and I never saw them again. Which is a shame because she was a great cook.

The word “*election*” may not look like a very big word and is commonly used by people today, but as we see Paul using it the word is huge. Election and predestination go hand in hand but are slightly different. Look at **verse 4**. *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.* Election simply means here that God has chosen us as His followers to be holy and blameless. In **verse 5** He says we have been *predestined* or *predetermined* to be adopted children of the King of Kings. Does that mean we don't have free will? Obviously not. We are all still held accountable for our choice to either accept or reject Him as our Savior. **Romans 14:12** says that each of us will give an account of ourselves before God.

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon one time said, “*They are two lines, the sovereignty of God and the free moral agency of man,*” and he added, “*I cannot make them meet, but you cannot make them cross.*” In other words, he couldn't understand it but that didn't mean it wasn't true.

Let me ask you a question. What color is this paper? It's not a trick question. (Paper is purple on one side and white on the other.) What color is it? Purple? No way! From my point of view, it is obviously white so I'm right and you're wrong. That's a ridiculous thing to say, right? Now, that's not a perfect illustration of God's sovereignty and our free will but it is just as ridiculous to say that since I don't understand how God can be sovereign and we still have free will then it must not be true.

I've told you I want the truth in this life and when I look out the door I see green grass and blue sky. But if the Bible says the grass is pink and the sky is white I'm gonna say, "*Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief.*" (Mark 9:24) because I know that God is truth and that I may not understand until I get to Heaven but someday I will understand and that's just fine with me! **Romans 3** says, "*Let God be true and every man a liar!*"

In **Genesis 15**, God told Abraham he would have a son. The years dragged on until Abe was 100 years old and his wife was 90 but God's will was done in the life of Abraham in spite of the laws of nature and age. In **Exodus chapter 3** God spoke to Moses from a burning bush and told him to go get the people of Israel and bring them back. When Moses protested, God said, "*Tell them that the I AM has sent you.*" He didn't say Mother Nature or the fates have sent him. God says to do it and He can make the Red Sea part a mile wide to make it happen. God could have made the Red Sea stand up and bark like a dog if He wanted to because He created the laws of nature so is anything too hard for God? (Genesis 18:14)

I get great joy and great peace from **Isaiah 55:8** that says, "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,*" declares the LORD. Oh, thank you, Lord, because I'm not sure I can explain how the paper can be purple and white at the same time much less how you can be sovereign and still give me free will! Thank you, Lord, that I don't have to understand predestination to be predestined. Thank you, Lord, that I don't have to understand how God can be 3-in-1 or how Jesus came back to life after being dead. All I have to do is believe!

I believe because everything He said in the Old Testament has come true and everything said in the New Testament has been confirmed. And everything He has promised in my life has been fulfilled so far so why would I not believe that God is sovereign and yet I still have free will? Then do you know what happens when we believe? Oh, go back to **Ephesians chapter 1** and now we can finally get to all the good stuff Paul wanted us to know. The sermon is nearly over. I better get to it!

What happens when we just believe? Look again at **verse 4**. We are chosen – *elected* – to be holy and blameless. Does that describe you? Well, then you better get to it! Holy means to be set apart or different and to be used in God's service. When we believe, we will not look like everybody else. We will be different and set apart. People will be able to see that we are elected.

When we elect a President of the United States, does he continue living in Nebraska or Texas or California where he always has? No. He moves into a big, white house in Washington D.C. He is set apart. He is different and he always will be for the rest of his

life. He is set apart for the service of the country. We chose him; we elected him to do that.

What else happens when we believe in Jesus as Lord? Look at **verse 5**. We are predestined to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ. Then it flows into **verses 7-8** where it says that we have the riches of God's grace lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. Have you ever been lavished with anything? "Lavish" means to bestow something in generous or extravagant quantities.

God's grace is bestowed on us in generous and extravagant quantities! It's like a waterfall. That's what happens when we believe. Jesus is God's Son but we are adopted to be co-heirs with Jesus to all that God has. **Romans 8:17** says, *"Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ"*

Ok, well, now my head is going blow up. It's going to explode because I can't take all that in. I can't fathom that because I know who I am and I see Who God is here and it doesn't make any more sense than predestination and free will! But I believe! I believe and God help my unbelief. God forgive my unbelief. God forgive me when I forget that I am called to be holy. Forgive me when I am "holier-than-thou" instead of holy. Forgive me when I forget that Jesus died for me so the Father could lavish me with all the riches of His grace.

All we have to do is believe. Have you done that? Have you publicly accepted Jesus to be the Lord of your life and asked Him to forgive you of all your sins? **Romans 10:9** says, *"If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* You don't have to understand everything. Aren't you glad of that? All you have to do is believe.