



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 for adoption to sonship 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, 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 reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (Ephesians 1:3–10).

In October 2011, the AP ran a moving story about a name-changing ceremony for girls in Mumbai, India. At birth the 285 girls had been named Nakusa or Nakushi, which means *unwanted* in the main Indian language of Hindi. The name *unwanted* is widely given to girls across India where families often value sons more than daughters. As a result, female babies are aborted or neglected at an alarming rate. But the renaming ceremony is an attempt to give the girls a new identity. The article reports, "The 285 girls—wearing their best outfits with barrettes, braids and bows in their hair—lined up to receive certificates with their new names along with small flower bouquets." Some of the girls chose new names that mean prosperous, beautiful, good, or even very tough. One girl who'd been named Nakusa by her grandfather said, "Now in school, my classmates and friends will be calling me by this new name, and that makes me happy."

Today I want to talk to you about **your** new name, **your** new identity. Our sense of who you are has a powerful impact on how you live your life. With a new name and a new sense of identity I have no doubt those girls will be more likely to live lives that are beautiful, good and even very tough. Why? Because identity shapes behavior.

Do you ever wonder why you feel like you must have another new pair of jeans, even when you already have 12 pairs in your closet? Do you ever find yourself walking away from a conversation wondering why you had to critique someone else; someone who wasn't even there? Do you ever wonder if you did that so you'd look a little better? Do you ever wonder why your child's

success in school or sports is so important to you? Why does it feel like a matter of life and death that they make that team or get into that college?

All those things are tied to our sense of identity. We do what we do largely because of who we think we are.

Background of Ephesians

Last week we started our journey through Paul's letter to the Ephesians. On a map you can find Ephesus along the coastline of the Aegean Sea. It was a busy port city of about 250,000 people. It was the headquarters of the cult of Diana with a massive temple devoted to her that was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Diana was a fertility goddess so part of worshipping her was hiring one of the many temple prostitutes that roamed the streets.

Paul had visited Ephesus twice. The second time he spent 2½ years there and when he left there was a thriving church mostly made up of Gentiles who'd come out of an idolatrous, immoral background. A few years after leaving Ephesus Paul found himself under house arrest in Rome. From his prison cell he wrote this letter and sent it with his friend Tychicus to bring to them.

Now you'd think Paul would write these new believers and tell them right off the bat everything they needed to do in order to clean up their act and start living lives that reflected the holiness of God. But he doesn't do that. Instead, for three chapters, half the letter, he reminds them of their new identity in Christ. In essence, he says over and over again, remember who you are. Remember all God has done for you in Christ and how that changes the core of your identity. He doesn't start with behavior. He starts with identity because identity shapes behavior.

Again, why is it so often we find our identity in what we do? If you're a successful salesperson and all of a sudden the market changes and you can't sell a thing, why do you go from feeling like a somebody to a nobody? Or if you're in a significant relationship and that person decides he doesn't want to stay in it, why do you go from feeling like a somebody to a nobody? Or you were having great day feeling good about life and then you heard about a friend who got a huge raise and is buying a nice new house, why does that make you feel like a loser? Why do we allow our worth to be defined by what we do?

Today we're looking at Ephesians 1:3–10. In this opening paragraph, Paul did a wonderful thing for these new believers. He

roots their identity not in what they do but in who they are in Christ. There are a few things to be aware of before we look at how he does that:

First, this passage is an outburst of praise and worship on the part of Paul. Here he is in prison but he can still praise God because his eyes are on Him and not his circumstances. He starts out in v. 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.

Then he continues on and spells out what those spiritual blessings are. The fact is verses 3–14 are one very long sentence of 202 words! Someone has called it a “golden chain of many links” or “a snowball tumbling down a hill, picking up volume as it descends.” I’m sure Paul was out of breath when he finished! But for Paul it’s these blessings, what God has done for us, that define who we are. These are spiritual blessings, not physical blessings, as he says they’re *“in the heavenly realm.”* The invisible realm of spiritual reality.

Another thing to be aware of is how many times he uses the phrase *“in Christ.”* That phrase “in Christ” or “in Him” appears 11 times. These are blessings we have in the heavenly realm where we’re united with Christ. It’s kind of like identity theft. That happens when someone steals your name and other personal information. Most of us fear identity theft; we try to prevent it. But in a way as believers we’re people who’ve taken someone else’s identity. Actually, it’s been given to us. And it’s a huge improvement. We were born “in Adam” as part of fallen humanity, but now we’re “in Christ” and part of a new redeemed humanity. This is so much better than identity theft—it’s an identity gift!

What are the blessings that make up our new identity? Today we’ll look at four of them: election, adoption, redemption, revelation.

He chose us

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight (v. 4).

First of all, **election**. When we use this word we’re saying we’ve been chosen by God. Throughout our lives we have many experiences of being chosen or not chosen: a person we’re romantically interested in, a university we want to attend, a team we want to play on, an employer we want to work for. We long to hear those words: “I choose you.” We tend to find our worth in that. We define ourselves by who chooses us and who doesn’t. Paul says, “he chose us in him before the creation of the world.” His mind reaches back before creation, before time began when only God existed. He had you in mind even then! He chose you!

Sometimes we struggle with this idea. We think, “Didn’t I chose God? Didn’t I accept Christ?” I’d answer, “Yes, you did, and freely.” But the Bible also teaches you did that only because in eternity God first chose you. This is a mystery. Do we have freedom and

with that responsibility? Yes. But didn’t he predestine us? Yes. I can’t completely wrap my head around that. We need to respect that mystery and not try to unravel it or systematize it too precisely. Someone said, “Try to explain election and you may lose your mind, but try to explain it away and you may lose your soul.”

But this is always how God has operated. He always makes the first move. In the Old Testament God chose Abraham in order to bless him. Later the Lord chose Israel to be his treasured possession from among all the peoples of the earth. Her election was solely because of God’s grace. God made that very clear. It had nothing to do with them being better or more righteous than other nations (Dt 7:6–8). And now, as those who are “in Christ,” we’re chosen as well. Again, he didn’t chose us because we’re better or we deserved it. In fact, Paul says in 1 Corinthians God chose the weak things of the world to shame the wise. He chose the nobodys to show up the somebodys.

Since the choice was made before the creation of the world, since you and I weren’t even around yet, we had nothing to do with it. The choice wasn’t based on something God saw in you or me, or on something we did, but rather on his own free decision and love. The reason he chose us isn’t rooted in our own righteousness but in the depths of his gracious, loving nature. That’s a wonderful assurance. If God’s choosing of us wasn’t dependent on us, then we can rest assured that the completion of his work in us doesn’t depend on us either.

We wonder why does God choose some and not others? That doesn’t seem fair. But the question is built on a faulty premise. It presupposes humans have no guilt. It’s like we imagine God walking down the sidewalk and randomly choosing who he’ll save from a group of innocent bystanders. But the fact is all of us are deserving of judgment. We should look at election as though he walked into a prison’s death row and mercifully pardoned and freed some inmates. Does the fact he did that mean the rest no longer deserve their sentence? Absolutely not! They’re just as guilty as ever! How can they accuse the One who pardons with injustice? Instead, we should really ask, “Why would God choose anyone at all?” Instead of saying that’s not fair, we should be really be overwhelmed with a sense of joy and praise like one released from death row.

Some people say, “Well, if I’m predestined then I don’t really have to do anything.” But Paul says the goal of our being chosen is that we’re “holy and blameless before him.” God’s purpose in choosing us wasn’t just to show his love but it was to conform us into the image of his Son. By the way, that process of becoming holy and blameless starts now. So far from encouraging laziness, the idea of election encourages holiness.

He adopted us

The second word Paul uses is **adoption**. As he’s called the Ephesians to remember their true identity, he says,

In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship 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 (verses 4–6).

He adopted you. Why? Because he loved you and because he wanted to and because it made him really happy. That's what he says: *"in love he predestined us for adoption"* and this was *"in accordance with his pleasure and will."* He adopted you—do you understand that? You can't **earn** that. It happens to you *"through Jesus Christ"* and *"to the praise of his glorious grace which he has freely given us in the One he loves."* You see, Jesus was God's beloved Son and now because we're "in him" we are too.

Our tendency is to see this through 21st century eyes rather than 1st century eyes. How would people in and around Ephesus have heard this? Adoption was common in the Roman world. It happened for all kinds of reasons: to pass on wealth and to establish political ties. Caesar Augustus was the adopted son of Julius Caesar.

One scenario was not uncommon. In Roman culture, when a baby was born it was set at the father's feet, and the father either picked up the baby, thereby claiming it, or he turned around and walked away, rejecting the baby. Maybe he wanted a boy and had a girl. Maybe the baby had some kind of defect that displeased him. Maybe he already had too many children. Rarely in Roman culture would the baby be killed. Instead, she'd be exposed to the elements for the gods to decide her fate. Outside the eastern gate of Ephesus, the edge opposite the theater and the harbor, there was a garbage dump where people would frequently bring babies they didn't want. When Paul writes to the churches in and around Ephesus and says **in love** God adopted them, he's writing to an abandonment culture where babies were routinely abandoned.

But they weren't always adopted out of love. Sometimes someone would come along and take the child in and raise it to be a slave or prostitute. There was even a manual on how to measure the dimensions of the child to increase the odds of picking one who would make a strong slave. Given the culture, the slave children considered themselves the lucky ones.

Have you ever been dumped? Dumped by a fiancé? Dumped by a spouse? Dumped by a kid who shut you out? Dumped by a company? Has any of this ever happened to you? Paul writes to you and says, "In love...he adopted you to sonship." Your most defining moment isn't who threw you out but who lovingly picked you up and took you home and made you his son.

The Ephesians were slipping into their old patterns of life. There were so many behavioral issues Paul could have addressed right out of the blocks in this letter. But Paul puts all that on hold to say, "Before I tell you to behave, let me remind you who you

belong to: He chose you, he adopted you out of love. Your most defining moment isn't who threw you out but who took you in.

He redeemed us

The third word Paul uses is **redemption**. The sounds like a heavy theological term, but it was also a trade word. To redeem something meant to buy it. Look at verses 7–8a:

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.

Not only did he choose us and adopt us, but he redeemed us. Again, let's not look at this through a 21st century lens; let's look at it through a 1st century lens, because Paul is writing to a slave culture.

Ephesus had one of the largest slave markets in the Roman world. In the marketplace in Ephesus, you could buy all kinds of things, including people. Ephesus was a center of slave trade in the Roman Empire. Some of these slaves had become Christians.

Imagine wandering into a courtyard where some believers are meeting. Some of them are slaves. You ask one of them, "Who do you belong to?" He says, "I belong to Rufus." You ask how this happened, and he says, "Well, as a baby I got dumped, and some guy and his wife came, picked me up, and took me to their house to raise me as a slave. I worked for them until I was 13, and then they took me to the marketplace and sold me." You say, "Can I ask you a personal question? How much did you sell for?" He says, "I was strong. I went for 50 pieces of silver. Rufus came in with a bag of money and redeemed me; he bought me."

Paul was writing to a culture where people were bought and sold, and he says, "Look, do you know that somebody bought you? Someone paid for you." How much were you worth to God? How much would he pay to free you from the debt of sin you owed him? The life blood of his Son wasn't too high a price for him to pay. *"In him we have redemption through his blood."* He didn't buy you with money. He bought you with a life. That's how he paid the redemption price to bring you to God.

With that blood he paid for your forgiveness. Most of us have debt. Imagine getting a letter in the mail one day telling you all your debts were paid; all your credit cards paid off; all your student loans paid off; your car loans; even your mortgage was paid in full. Who would do that? Why would they do that? That's what Paul is saying—he paid your debt. All of it. It took a lot for him to do that. It cost him his Son. But he did it *"in accordance with the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us."* What beautiful language! God isn't a reluctant giver; he lavishes his riches upon us; he showers us with grace; he drenches us with it.

There were slaves in the Ephesian church. If you look in Ephesians 6 you'll read this: *"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ."* He's saying: This is what it means to be a Christ-follower.

If you happen to be in someone's house as a slave, don't be a jerk; don't be disrespectful. Even if your master treats you like dirt, remember someone **else** bought you. Your primary identity isn't that you're owned by Rufus; your primary identity is God paid for you with the blood of his Son. You're his. I love what he said to the slaves in Corinth: *"If you were a slave when the Lord called you, you're free in Christ, and if you were free when the Lord called you, you're his slave"* (1 Cor 7:22). So it doesn't matter that much any more whether you're a slave or you're free. Your identity is in the Lord. So if you're a slave, do your work for him, and if you're free, live like you're his slave. Identity changes behavior.

He revealed to us the mystery

He chose you. He adopted you. He redeemed you. This is who you are in Christ. This is your new identity. But there's one more thing. It has to do with a secret. We all like secrets. We like to be let in on some important bit of information before others know about it. It makes us feel special. We like to be in the know. Well, Paul tells us that in Christ we've been let in on a secret, or what he calls "the mystery." What he reveals here is no less than the mystery of the universe. Look at what he says in verses 8–10:

...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 reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

This word "mystery" is one of Paul's favorite words. It's no wonder. We all love a good mystery. But when Paul uses this word he means something very specific; something hidden in past ages but now made known to his people. A mystery is a secret which only God reveals. We can never discover it unless God reveals it. No course of instruction, no curriculum of a university, no scientific investigation, will ever reveal this mystery. God must disclose it to us.

The mystery that Paul is talking about here has to do with whether or not there's purpose in the universe. Do the events of history make any sense? Is history, both here and in the invisible realm, moving toward any one goal? Or is life, as Shakespeare had Hamlet put it, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing?" There are many people today who say there's no purpose for the universe. G. N. Clark, former president of Cambridge, said, "There is no secret and no plan in history to be discovered. I do not believe that any future consummation could make any sense of all the irrationalities of preceding ages. If it could not explain them, still less could it justify them." Similarly, French writer Andre Maurois said, "The universe is indifferent.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

Who created it? Why are we here upon this puny mud heap, spinning in infinite space? I have not the slightest idea, and I am quite convinced that no one else has the least idea."

But Paul reveals here the mystery that there **is** a purpose behind it all. He says history is moving towards a fulfillment and that's *"to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."* That's what God is doing in history. He's working to unite all things in Christ. That's an amazing statement, because when you look at history it looks as if the opposite is occurring, as if things are falling apart. But Paul wants us to know this is the direction God is moving, this is what he's going to do—unite all things in him. The Greek word for *unite* means "to sum up; to bring something to the main point." It's like when God brings this about there will be this cosmic harmony with all creation centered and focused on the person of Jesus Christ.

When Paul says "all things," he means **all** things. In fact, he amplifies it: *"things in heaven and on earth."* That is, things in the invisible realm of the heavenliness we talked about last week, the forces which are at work in our lives right now, but which we can't see. This includes the "rulers and authorities" in the unseen world who are opposed to God and his people. But it also includes all the visible forces on earth, the struggles between nations, the strife among individuals, and most of all the bringing together of his own people from every tribe and tongue and nation into one church. All these will be united together, brought to a head, and summed up in the person of Christ.

Paul has now taken from eternity to eternity! From what happened in eternity past before the creation of the world to what will happen in eternity future when all things will be summed up in Christ. It's like we've been given a sweeping view of cosmic history and we get to be a part of it!

Let's say it together: *Identity shapes behavior. He chose me. He adopted me. He paid for me. He made known to me.* That's who you are at your core. That's your identity. Not your house, not your title, not your children, not your looks. There's freedom in your true identity as a child of God. When I remember and believe who I am at my fundamental core, I'm set free. I'm free to parent without having to find my own identity in my kids' success. I'm free to get older without thinking my worth is based on how I look. I'm free to spend appropriately—to refrain from buying all kinds of junk I don't need to fill a hole in me. Knowing who you are will free you. It will free you to serve. It will free you to obey. Identity shapes behavior. He chose you, adopted you, redeemed you and made known to you.

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