

Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow

Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14

Resolutions

Here we are, at the beginning of New Year, 2022! Many people, yours truly included, often create New Years' Resolutions. Do any of you do that? Usually I make one to get into better shape. I've been saying I needed to get into better shape for years, and maybe that's you, too – but within two weeks I fall off the exercise bandwagon, and am in the same shape I was before the resolution was ever made! I won't ask how many of you are there with me, I think it's a pretty common thing that happens. It's why all these gyms offer huge discounts on memberships in their commercials. They know people will say that they want to get in better shape, and then fall off the bandwagon after showing up once or twice. So that \$30 or \$60 one month trial membership to Total Fitness, or you pick your gym of choice, is a quick buck for the physical fitness industry. While I think it's important to be in good physical shape, to do all the things God needs us to do to further His kingdom, I'm going to spend some time with you this morning talking about getting into shape another way, but first, I'd like to get you on the same mental wavelength that I'm on by focusing on a letter Paul wrote the ancient church at Ephesus this morning. I'll be reading from the New International Version. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Ephesians 1:3-14. **Read Ephesians 1:3-14.**

In the days when this book was first written, Ephesus was a major city in that part of the world. It was a trading port, and even had a major temple to the Greek and Roman goddess, Artemis or Diana. Greeks and Romans worshiped the same gods, they just switched out names. Greeks called her Artemis, the Romans called her Diana. She was a goddess of the moon. They had a rock inside the temple to her in Ephesus that people thought were the goddess' tears because they had enough of a scientific understanding of things that they knew a meteorite originates in outer space, instead of on earth.

Unlike some of the other letters Paul wrote, Ephesians doesn't address any particular error or heresy. He wrote to expand the understanding of the ancient church regarding God's eternal purpose and His grace, so that the church could better appreciate the goals God had for it. It's useful for us today, too, because in reading the text there are a few things we can focus in on to get a better grasp of God's grace poured out for us through the atoning and redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

Doxology

What's really interesting about the passage we just read is that it's all one sentence in the original Greek language. I'm not the best when it comes to grammar, but I can picture my high school English teacher, Mr. Abbott, having a fit if he would've

gotten a paper with one long sentence like this in it! What can we say? Paul was no English teacher! The text we're looking at today is often referred to as a "doxology," because it tells what God has done and it's an expression of worship to honor Him. This passage speaks of the blessings we receive through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The first verse of our text today, verse 3, reads, "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." That's something to be joyful about! God has already blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms. You know, because of Jesus Christ we have dual citizenship. You know this, right? We're citizens of this world, of course, because we're in it – but more importantly, we're also citizens of God's kingdom, heaven. That's our eternal home because of our faith in Jesus Christ and what He's done in our behalf at the cross. We've been blessed, according to Paul, with every spiritual blessing.

You know what I think of, when I think of spiritual blessing? I think of the fruit of the Spirit. Paul wrote about it in Galatians 5:22-23. He says, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law." Think about that. When you love and follow Jesus Christ and eventually get to heaven, it's going to be your best version of you who's going to be there. The Father's reshaping us, even now, to be fit for these spiritual blessings when we get there.

Counted as Righteousness

Paul goes on. He says, "For He [talking about God] 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 children through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will," (Eph. 1:4-5). We need to understand what Paul's saying here. He's not saying we're mindless robots. He's saying we're chosen in Jesus Christ. Why would we be chosen in Jesus Christ? It's not because of anything you or I have done. It's all because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross – that's the kicker. God determined long before the world was made, that those who love and follow – those who put their faith and hope in Jesus Christ, if you will – would be holy and blameless in His sight. When you go back into the book of Genesis, and you see all those patriarchs – Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob – you usually find a line that says something to the effect that "God counted it as righteousness" to the person. We live in a linear timeline, and God is way beyond it. He's able to pop in and out of our timeline at will.

I've had kids ask me before "How can Jesus be God if He wasn't born until Christmas morning at Bethlehem?" That's a good question. It's a great question – it shows that they're thinking about what they're hearing, and that's a good thing. God gives us the gift of reason to help understand these paradoxes – these problems.

Jesus always was – true God of true God, He just wasn't fully human until He was born into the manger at Bethlehem. Then He became the Perfect Human, God-in-the-flesh. Those patriarchs hadn't heard of Jesus, but they knew God. They listened to Him, and by extension, they listened to, and followed, Jesus Christ. He loved them enough to go to the cross – just like He loves us enough to take the nails.

That's what Paul tells the church next. He says, "To the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves," (verse 6). God pours out God's mercy – undeserved mercy – on us through Jesus Christ. Listen, he says, "In Him [Jesus] 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," (verses 7-8). You and I have done some bad stuff. I've done some bad stuff in life, I don't deserve His mercy – His grace – yet He pours it out on us through that precious blood shed on the cross and He washes us as white as snow. God does that because He loves us – it's not because of anything you or I have done, or will do. Anything we do as a response to His love, that's our worship. That's us returning our love for His love for the world. And He does it knowing fully all the mistakes we've made, and are going to make. He loves us anyhow.

Spread the News and Obey It

"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," (verses 9-10), Paul writes. We know what God's will is. You know what God's will is, don't you church? God's will is that every person in this whole world would hear the gospel, the Good News, of Jesus Christ, accept the gift He's given them, and allow the Holy Spirit to transform their lives. That's what He wants. That what Jesus tells us at the end of Matthew's gospel, He tells the disciples – and us today, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you," (Matt. 28:19-20a). It's a two-fold kind of thing – spread the news, and then obey it.

That's what God's will for us is. And friends, God is the One who does the heavy lifting in all of this. For starters, He took the nails. He died, and then laid dead in the tomb for three days before He rose again on Easter morning. He also softens our hearts, helps us be receptive to hearing the Good News of what Jesus has done for us, and what He keeps doing for us. And He puts His own Holy Spirit inside us to help guide and nurture us ever deeper into a closer relationship with Himself. He's the Giver of every good and perfect gift, and we're the recipients. We receive. If we took this seriously – really put it into practice, it would be a real game-changer. Can you imagine the whole world under the headship of Jesus Christ? Right now it's something we pray

with John the apostle, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus,” (Rev. 22:20), but someday He’s coming back!

“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,” (Eph. 1:11-12). Jesus Christ is the center of God’s plan. He’s the center of the whole Creation, always has been, and forever will be. Now whether we want to look at that from the view of Creation, or the individual, either way, if Jesus Christ isn’t at the center, there’s no hope there. No future. We know this, right? There is no future without Jesus Christ. Our relationship with Him is what determines our destiny. Now, I want to pause for just a second to talk real quick on this idea of “having been predestined.” Some people believe in an idea called “predestination.” I grew up in a different denomination, and wrestled for years with the idea of predestination for two reasons. You see, in churches with a Calvinistic theology, predestination is something they firmly believe in. My problem with it is, if God had already decided to save me, then anything I did sin-wise, wouldn’t really matter, because I’m already saved. You follow me, church?

Predestination

It’s like having a license to sin. So I did. And then, when I hit my mid-twenties and started to realize through reading the Word that that wasn’t how it worked, got caught up in the sin and the consequences of sin, I swung the other way. Where before I had a self-righteous attitude that nothing I did would have consequences, and then they suddenly did. So, I swung the opposite way, and experienced Hell on earth for a few years. If I’m predestined to Hell, then what’s the point of trying to follow Jesus Christ in the first place? Into that state of hopelessness, the Word of God spoke to me and showed me that “God so loved the world, He gave His Only Son that whoever believes in Him,” that’s us friends, “shall not perish but have everlasting life,” John 3:16 says.

The main thing the church I grew up in missed, which John Wesley wrote sermons about, and the United Methodist Church and its predecessor churches advocated is the concept of free will. Our choices, our decisions, have consequences, but we worship a loving and compassionate God who will not turn a repentant sinner away, when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and let the in-dwelling presence of the Holy Spirit mold us into better image-bearers of our King. That’s how I’m able to stand up here to preach to you this morning – it’s not me. I’m not the same guy I was twenty years ago. I’m not even the same guy I was ten years ago. It’s the grace of God given through Jesus Christ equipping and doing the heavy lifting.

Our job as the redeemed of God, beloved children, adopted by God through Jesus Christ, is to praise Him and bring Him glory. We’ve already touched on how this happens today. It’s a great mystery of the faith. Paul writes, “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," (Eph. 1:13-14). We do that when we share the gospel with others, and when we make it a point to spend time deepening relationships with other believers, but most of all with the One who loves us most.

In closing, for New Year, 2022, I hope you'll make the same resolution that I have, to get into better shape. Better relational shape with the One who loves us most, and with other lovers and followers of Jesus Christ. We do that by giving our gifts of time, prayer, and praise. I'm starting that resolution today, right now, as we come together with God's saints throughout the ages around the Lord's Table, and I invite you to do the same. "Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow; praise Him, all creatures here below; praise Him above, ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen," (UMH 95). Happy New Year, 2022, New Hope Church!

Prayer: God of new beginnings, You wipe away our tears and call us to care for one another. Give us eyes to see Your gifts, hearts to embrace all Creation, and hands to serve You every day of our lives. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.