

## Meditation on Ephesians 1:1-6

Waldron Scott

Mid-State Correctional Facility 2001

Chapter One, verses 1-2 (NIV): "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."

The date is about 60 C.E. Paul is in prison in Rome. More precisely, he is "out on bail," while awaiting trial and sentencing. The context is described in Acts 28. Interestingly, the Romans did not customarily sentence a person to prison. The accused *awaited trial* in prison or under house arrest. Once the trial was concluded, a person was freed, flogged, exiled or (like Jesus) executed immediately. Ephesians is the first of four letters Paul wrote at this time – the others being to the house churches at Philippi and Colosse, and to his friend, Philemon, resident in Colosse.

Paul begins by asserting his identity as an apostle of Messiah Jesus by the will of God. In prison, where all power is stripped from one's life and one is demeaned daily, it is not easy to maintain a sense of calling and purpose. During conversations with Bishara Libbus and Bill Young, who visit me in prison regularly, I find, surprisingly, that my own fundamental identity as a missionary remains strong. I tend to examine the "big questions" of life from a missiological perspective. This, I think, is evidence of God's presence and grace.

Whether Paul wrote exclusively to the church at Ephesus is moot. I have read that a few of the oldest manuscripts do not have the word Ephesus in the opening sentence, and verse 15 further down in Chapter 1 seems to imply that Paul was writing to people he had not known personally. Moreover, the epistle concerns broad and general themes. Therefore it may have been a kind of encyclical – such as modern Popes issue -- intended for all the house churches in the province of "Asia," the western part of what is modern Turkey.

Along with Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria, Ephesus was a major city of the Empire and the capital city of "Asia." Paul had founded the church there, as well as other house churches in the surrounding area. Acts 19 has the details. He ministered there for more than two years, longer than at any other place, so far as I know.

Paul refers to his readers as “the faithful.” This is the Roman Catholic preferred way of referencing believers, and I like it. It implies complete trust in God. It also implies perseverance in hard times, with which first-century disciples were well acquainted.

Those who are powerless, living on the underside of history, deprived of material resources, and “numbered with the transgressors,” as I am now, are perhaps more conscious than others of their need for God’s generosity, that is, his *grace*. For us Jesus’ Beatitudes, preserved by Matthew and Luke, carry special weight.

The *peace* Paul speaks of is not just peace of mind (John 14) or the mere absence of troubles (John 16), but “shalom,” a rich Hebrew expression that conveys the idea of fullness of life in community. That is, it has a *social* as well as an individual dimension. A marginalized group, such as the early church, or a prisoner such as Paul, or myself, for that matter, is tempted to withdraw from the public sphere, to become insular and preoccupied with survival. Paul’s concept of the peace God purposes for humanity does not allow him to succumb to the temptation. Nor will he encourage the Ephesians to think of salvation solely in individualistic terms.

Verses 3-6: “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.”

“The God...of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Previously when Paul thought of God, he thought of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now he has come to identify God with Jesus as well. I notice that Paul distinguishes not only Jesus the man from God, and not only Jesus the Messiah from God, but also Jesus the *Lord*. “Lord” is the title by which Paul proclaims Jesus Christ to the Hellenic world, the title by which he emphasizes Jesus’ position “at the right hand of God in the heavenly realms” (vs. 1:20 further on), far above all principalities and powers.

In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity had not yet developed with the subtlety it would attain in the fourth century CE. Paul does not yet equate Jesus of Nazareth with the God of the Hebrew Bible. This is consistent with what I find in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke – though perhaps not in John’s Gospel, which was written some 35 years after Paul wrote Ephesians. This is not to say that Paul thought of Jesus *only* as man, but I’m not

sure he had worked out all the theological nuances in his own mind at this point.

God is not only the God of our Lord Jesus Christ but also his *Father*. God was known as Father in Old Testament times – see Malachi 1:6, for instance. And various personages in the Hebrew Bible are called “son(s) of God,” which implies fatherhood. But neither Jews nor anyone else before Jesus felt free to *relate* to God as Father. Jeremiah 3:19 has God complaining, “I thought (that is, “I had hoped”) you would call me ‘Father.’” But they could not. The full implications of God as Father could not be grasped. I myself have had difficulty at this point.

As I read the Gospels, the center of Jesus’ teaching and embodiment of the reign of God was the Fatherhood of God. He knew that at the heart of the universe is One who warrants our complete trust, who cares for us as an ideal father would. In this respect Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of heaven was in stark contrast with John the Baptizer’s proclamation of the same kingdom.

For Jesus’ audiences, and especially his disciples, understanding God as Father necessitated a radical change in worldview. All the peoples of the ancient world, Jews included, envisioned gods and God in terms of arbitrary power. Jesus’ disciples had to “repent” of their former worldview, with its faulty conception of God, and believe the “good news” about the reign of God – that is, about what God is really like. As I read evangelical literature today I realize that many – I won’t say most – Christians maintain a faulty conception of God.

“Heavenly realms” is a phrase that reflects Paul’s first-century worldview, which is not identical with mine today. Paul’s generation conceived of reality in terms of “above” and “below.” The heavenly realms were the upper regions of reality. That realm included God, angels, and other invisible forces that shape human affairs. How literally Paul conceived this realm – that is, whether he thought of it as somewhere in or above the sky – is open to question, but he may well have.

In the context of our modern scientifically oriented worldview, I find it easier to think in terms of “inner” and “outer” rather than up and down. I can conceive, as the paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin did, of every bit of reality as having an inner spiritual or “heavenly” dimension as well as an outer, material one. Thus in vs. 1:23 below Paul describes Christ as “he who fills every thing in every way.”

One advantage of thinking metaphorically in terms of inner and outer rather than above and below is that it provides common ground for communicating with adherents of Eastern religions and their New Age counterparts, as well as with certain people of

scientific bent. Christ *IN* us is the hope of glory, as Paul would later write to the Colossians.

God has blessed us with every *spiritual* blessing in Christ. Material blessings also come from God. But material blessings cannot be the focus of my relationship to God, as they seem to be for those who preach the popular “prosperity gospel” today. It is only natural that the poor and oppressed of the world will seek material relief through Jesus. Yet the hard truth is that my material circumstances will not always be pleasant, regardless of my relationship with God. In stressful circumstances I can still appropriate the spiritual blessings of redemption, and in the process come to value the spiritual more than the material.

The subject of verse 4 and the verses following is predestination, a word/idea that has become almost meaningless today. The purpose of Jesus’ parables was to try to get his audience to look at ultimate reality (the reign of God) from a fresh angle. I will try to read verse 4 and those following with 21<sup>st</sup> century lenses.

The “he” at the beginning of verse 4 is God the Father. God the Father “chose.” That is, God made a free decision. God did not act out of necessity. That’s why everything is grace (vs. 1). To speak of God choosing is to speak anthropomorphically, of course, attributing human characteristics and behavior to God. I am not describing God as God really is. It’s just that human language and imagination are limited. It’s the only way I have to talk about God.

God chose us “before the creation of the world.” (I’ll return to “us” in a moment.) If “world” means universe, then God made the free decision before the emergence of four-dimensional space-time. But “before” has no meaning when there is not yet time. So perhaps God’s free decision was made after the Big Bang 15 billion years ago, but before the planet earth came into being -- and long before life, much less human beings, evolved.

Or perhaps “before” is used here in the sense of precedence, as when I say, “I stand in line before you.” In that case, Paul is emphasizing the value God placed on the human beings. In the Creation, we were of more importance to God than the other elements of the universe. This is the “anthropic principle” that Polkinghorne speaks of.

What Paul is talking about here is *purpose*. He is saying that, contrary to what many in both East and West believe today, the universe is not without meaning. Behind the vast eons of evolutionary change there is divine *intent*. Now Paul gets even more specific: God chose “us,” he says. Who is this *us*?

It is quite possible that “us” includes all human beings, or human persons, who have ever lived or ever will live. (I like to distinguish between humans and persons, for reasons I have recorded elsewhere.) There is nothing in these particular verses that precludes that. And I have to keep in mind that Paul’s readers

did not possess the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament. However, it is equally possible that Paul could be referring to only a selection of the human population. Given Paul's worldview, the latter is most likely, though there are passages in Paul that tend toward universalism. But in either case, and most importantly, God chose us "in him," that is, in Jesus, Messiah and Lord.

"In him" is not an easy phrase to grasp. It's difficult to find an analogy in contemporary language. The closest analogy I can think of is "in love." Being in love is a state of mind that tends to be all encompassing. And that may be true of our relationship with Jesus. Yet I don't think that is what Paul has in mind when he employs the phrase. Let me paraphrase what I think Paul is trying to say: "For God chose us *in association with Christ and all that God purposed to fulfill in the Christ-event.*"

It is because of "him" that it is conceivable that God's choice may include all human persons who have ever lived or will live. For Paul says in another place, "the result of [Jesus'] one act of righteousness [at Calvary] was justification that brings life to *all men*" (Romans 5:18, emphasis mine).

But why did God, before the creation of the world, choose some, or perhaps all? What was God's purpose, God's intent? Paul's answer – "to be holy and blameless in God's sight." How can this thought be made meaningful today? Superficially I might assume that Paul is talking here about sinlessness. But there is much more to it than that. Let me ponder "holy" and "blameless" separately.

To be holy (the word applies to material objects and gods, and to God, as well as to people) is to be special, to be set apart. It is to be dedicated to a certain purpose. That is to say, there is something else *beyond* being holy and blameless. Before determining what that might be, let me return to the anthropic principle.

The anthropic principle posits that if quantum conditions in the first moment (milliseconds, actually) after the Big Bang had been different in the *slightest* degree, the universe would have evolved differently and life as we know it would be impossible. In other words, the universe has evolved in such a way as to produce human beings. Stated theistically, the universe was created to produce human *persons* capable of a free and loving relationship with God.

This is why Paul, though not a 20<sup>th</sup> century scientist, could say, "God chose *us*...before the creation of the world to be holy" – to be special, set apart for some special intent.

"Blameless," I suggest, means to *fulfill* God's intent (which is beyond both holy and blameless) satisfactorily. And what is this greater intent? The answer to this question is suggested by the final two words of verse 4, "in love."

Before pursuing this thought I need to recognize that Bible scholars and translators seem to disagree about the placement of this phrase, “in love.” The older Bible translations, such as the King James Version, have verse 4 ending like this: to be holy and blameless before him in love. The newer translations read: to be holy and blameless in his sight...full stop...then a new sentence begins (which should actually initiate verse 5) with “In love he predestined us, etc.”

It really doesn't matter. In either case, the central thought is God's fatherly love. Personally, I prefer the older editing because I think it better completes the thought Paul had in mind when he began to write verse 4. If so, the full phrase I must consider is “to be holy and blameless in God's sight in love.” Read this way, I can imagine that before the creation of the world God generated a vision (I write anthropomorphically, with all its limitations) of an eternal community of love. That is what is suggested by “in God's sight” (NIV) or “before him” (KJV).

This community of loving persons, in loving relationship with God and each other, and the whole universe (or all the universes that may exist) is to be – by God's free choice – the ultimate product of billions of years of evolution. And the key moment in this long, incredible process is the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth on the scene. It is “in him” – or I could say, *through* him – that I am chosen and that God's ultimate purpose is achieved.

This is where the fearsome verb “predestined” is introduced. (And maybe that is why the newer translations begin a new sentence with “In love he predestined...” to take the sting out of it). Why is this verb, predestined, so repugnant to moderns? By itself it is rather ordinary. To predestine is simply to predetermine.

But there is something more than simple predetermining. It means, usually, to predetermine one's ultimate *fate*. And it implies that no freewill choice is involved. One's fate is settled well ahead of time. Moreover, the implication is that one's fate is predetermined by *another*. Finally, the verb's ugliness stems from the fact that certain Christian traditions maintain that God predestines some people for damnation and others for salvation, a thought not easy to reconcile with the fatherhood of God.

But none of this is what Paul is speaking of. He is not speaking of ultimate fate in itself. He is describing a particular *kind* of destiny – for us, whomever he means by “us.” This predetermined destiny (determined before the creation of the world – in fact, the reason *why* the world was created) is that we should be adopted as sons into God's family – the community of love mentioned earlier.

Of course, the Bible is the product of a patriarchal culture. “Sons” therefore has to be read generically to include “daughters.”

“There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). This community of love is another way of speaking about the kingdom of God, or the reign of God. But I prefer community – or family – to kingdom.

A second caveat: why *adoption*? Paul is clearly using the word here in a different way and for a different purpose than he did in his letter to the Galatians. Here he is emphasizing that I cannot be *begotten* as God’s child in the way my parents begot me.

We share the same nature as our parents; we do not share God’s nature. We are a contingent creation. We do not *emanate* from God as some New Age religions, based on Gnosticism, aver. The ultimate product of evolution is something other than God. If we are destined to become members of an eternal community (family) of love, we must be adopted into it.

Scripture employs a variety of means to discuss spiritual matters. I just noted that Paul uses “adoption” differently in Galatians. John’s Gospel does not speak of adoption at all! Instead, John speaks of being “born” of God, and of being “born again.” These are not contradictory concepts. They are just paradoxical – different ways of articulating a mystery difficult to articulate.

My adoption as God’s child is God’s choice. God’s predestining is, Paul affirms, “in accordance with God’s pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”

This entire opening paragraph, verses 1-6, is intended by Paul to highlight God’s “glorious grace” “freely given to us” (which is just another way of describing grace) “in the One God loves.” Let me assume for the moment that Jesus of Nazareth was a human person like any one of us. Nothing Paul says in Ephesians 1 would contradict this. (The capitalization of One was done by modern editors, not by Paul.) At best, Paul sees Jesus as some kind of exalted human, “seated at God’s right hand” (vs. 1:20) as a consequence of God having raised him from the dead. (Later, of course, ideas would become more refined.)

At Jesus’ baptism, Matthew, Mark, and Luke agree that a voice came from “heaven” (within?) saying, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” This is surely the oral tradition upon which Paul based the phrase in verse 6, “the One God loves.” Now what had the 30-year-old Jesus done that would cause God the Father to refer to him as Son and express pleasure in him? Alternatively I could ask: Why, at this point in his life, as he was about to begin his mission, was Jesus so conscious that he was God’s son, and that God took pleasure in him?

The usual answer is that he had been a good son to his widowed mother, a good student of the Torah, competent as a carpenter or cabinet maker, and a role model in his home town. But I think there may be a better explanation, more consistent with

what Paul is saying to the Ephesians, more consistent even with what Jesus himself taught, namely, that during those 30 years he had, in contrast with the religious tradition in which he was raised, learned to call God “Father” *and* relate to God as such.

Thus Jesus answered, as it were, the complaint God had voiced centuries before through prophets such as Jeremiah and Malachi. *Finally* a human being had emerged, after 40,000 years of human evolution, who saw who God really was, and was prepared to draw the consequent conclusions from that insight. Henceforth it would be “in him” that God would create a new Israel (Galatians 6:10) – *Homo spiritualus*, we might say.

Further, in Jesus’ resurrection, (or re-creation, as in 2 Corinthians 5:17) the resurrection of all who are “in him” is guaranteed. Although at the moment of death all such disciples die conscious of their imperfection, they too will be “raised,” body and spirit, into God’s heavenly community, or family, of love – holy and blameless, with an “eternity” in which to be conformed more and more into the image of “the One God loves.”

In this way, from an evolutionary standpoint – an evolution that extends not only from the far distant past but into the far distant future – I may be able to better understand what the writer of Hebrews points to when he declares, “Both the one who makes men [and women] holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers [and sisters]” (Hebrews 2:11).