

What God Has Always Wanted 2024  
Psalm 100:1-5 Ephesians 1:3-14

Psalm 100 (New Revised Standard Version)

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Ephesians 1:3-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Hal and Gladys were a much older couple, members at my first church.

Hal went into the hospital and was very ill, and he got more sick.

His organs began shutting down and Drs didn't expect him to live.

I prayed a prayer with Hal and Gladys,

and it was amazing and shocking that he got better and came home.

And afterward Gladys was sure I had a special connection with God,  
that somehow the prayer I prayed was what turned the corner.

It's encouraging & faith affirming that sometimes God works that way,  
we ask and we receive what we want, and it seems just that simple.

But it's not always that easy, sometimes trouble & problems continue,  
or worse, the easy and quick solutions we seek are not forthcoming,  
and despite earnest prayer, life doesn't go exactly as we want.

I suppose it would be nice, if whenever we were facing a problem,  
that if we would pray fervently enough and had faith enough,  
that God would just step in and fix it **according to our will.**

That would make for a very easy and straight forward theology,  
but by my experience is that it doesn't always work out that way.

Often times what seems to us to be the obvious best answer & solution,  
& despite our faith & prayers, it all doesn't work out as we desire,  
which can feel like maybe God isn't really listening.

So I need a theology for times of continuing suffering and struggle,  
**a theology of endurance**, for when life doesn't resolve as I want,  
**a theology of faith**, that can trust beyond what can be seen,  
and **a theology of hope**, for hopelessly impossible situations.

I need a theology that helps amid difficulty, worry & disappointment,  
a theology for those times when life seems harsh and unfair,  
for when there are no easy answers or quick and simple solutions,  
especially for times when our struggles go on, and on, and on.

When this letter was written to the Church in Ephesus,  
it was very difficult to be a Christian in that place and time.

The Church, the community of believers was being persecuted,  
and their life-situation was very dangerous & discouraging.

In Ephesus, the Apostle Paul was beaten, arrested and imprisoned,  
in fact this passage was written by Paul from a prison or dungeon.  
He even refers to himself as an ambassador in chains, a prisoner in Christ.

Despite that circumstance of unimaginable suffering and struggle,  
Paul begins his letter by proclaiming the Good News with great joy  
with incredible assurance that God is up to something wonderful.

**For Paul and the Christians in Ephesus, these were very tough times,  
so how could Paul write with such exuberance, hope and confidence?**

This Ephesians text isn't about some quality **in us** or what we do,  
but is describing God's character as giver of mercy in abundance,  
& celebrates the incredible blessings of grace we have in Christ.

Ephesians, perhaps more than the other books and letters of the NT,  
is a most Presbyterian perspective, in the best sense of that word.  
The author, like a good Presbyterian begins with  
**a theology of grace and God's love and sovereignty.**

Listen to the initial focus that celebrates and describes  
what God chose to accomplish through Jesus Christ. vs. 3-5

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every  
spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world  
to be holy and blameless before him in love.

He **chose us** in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in  
love. He **destined us** for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure  
of his will.

He **chose and destined us** is the very heart and center of our theology.  
To be destined, or 'pre-destination' does not in any way mean  
that some are created to be healed and saved by God's grace,

while others were created intending for them damnation.

Actually *chosen and destined* means,

that there has never been a time, before we were loved by God,  
and in fact, that God already and always has loved us,  
even before God had created time, or created any of us,

and there will never be a time when God won't **still love us**,  
and that we are all loved and valued far more than we can imagine.

God chose us in Christ before the foundations of the world,  
by grace, already a plan to heal and save his lost children.

It's like one lover saying to another, "you were always meant for me."

The reason we are created, and the very purpose for our being,  
is in order to be recipients of God's love, mercy and blessings  
to follow the example of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ,  
to reflect that truth and compassion back out into the world.

Now that theology wasn't new, unique or original with Paul,  
but is very much the same message as we read from Psalm 100, vs. 1, 3, 5

**Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. ... Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ... For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.**

From the starting point of God's blessings through Jesus Christ,  
and the promise that God is fulfilling his plan & gracious purpose,  
that can make all the difference and guide how we choose to live,  
and **how we choose to respond to the realities of our life.**

God's love and promises, his mercy and grace that heals and saves us,  
these are way beyond this world's perspective and limitations,  
**and call us to conduct our lives on the basis of that Good News.**

So we don't live by appearances or the circumstances of this world,  
but by the gracious love of Christ that affirms & guides our lives.

In the culture and context of ancient Ephesus, the church persecuted,  
and though trying to be faithful was very difficult & frightening  
in that corrupt culture so hostile to Christ and Christianity,

yet this passage offers a vision of hope and God's promise,  
and a call to trust because our God has things under control,  
which is a very encouraging truth for us to hear and trust.

That also means, we don't have to struggle or feel anxious  
under the weight of fear, disappointment, despair or defeat,  
**but in trust, we can hope because God is working his plan & purpose.**

The point is that the Lord was not shocked or surprised  
by their struggles, losses and suffering in Ephesus,  
for God had set his plan in process even before Creation,  
which in the end, will be entirely & perfectly fulfilled.

At times our problems & struggles in this world can feel overwhelming  
 but God's steadfast perfection, God's power, wisdom and purpose,  
 these are our firm foundation and absolute assurance and truth  
**our certainty that all is exactly as the Lord intends,**

which provides a security & freedom, **hope beyond our circumstances**  
 that's sustained by faith, trust & confidence in the promises of God.  
**So it's our task to trust and to live out God's grace and will.**

Notice that Paul doesn't focus on disappointments or troubles,  
 but on God's continuing purpose, will and plan, **effects of grace**  
 that cannot and will not be defeated or derailed, vs. 3, 6, 13,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every  
 spiritual blessing, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him  
 you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him,  
 were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, this is the pledge of our inheritance.

As an excited youngster, did you ever race to tell someone something,  
 then all out of breath, rush through trying to tell it in one breath,  
 speaking without stopping and trying to get it all out at once? ...

**... I think that's how this Ephesians passage is supposed to be read.**

Though for ease and clarity, most English translations  
 break these verses of Ephesians into several sentences,  
 in the original Greek it's all just one long sentence  
 that reads like a rushing and splashing cascade  
 of escalating joy and exuberant praise of God,

and that explodes with grateful joy and delight, starting vs. 4, 11-12,

He chose us **in Christ** before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in  
 love. **In Christ** we have obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him  
 who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who set our hope **on Christ**,  
 might live for the praise of his glory.

The point is, that before the foundations of the world had been laid,  
 God had already destined, according to his divine purpose and will,  
 so that we might live for the praise of his glory,  
 having set our faith, hope and trust in Jesus Christ.

This faith consists of hope, trust, endurance and assurance  
 and is not a matter of just believing certain religious facts,  
**but is a life lived in growing relationship with God**  
**in which that relationship of grace, trust and love**  
**is what drives our thinking, our words and behavior.**

The fact is and God's promise is that our lives are so arranged  
 that we were chosen, loved and destined for mercy,  
 long before the foundations of the world were laid.

**To be created is to already be chosen, precious and loved by God.**  
**And to live, means that God's grace is a gift always available.**

I remember ordering some eggs and bacon at a diner in Calabash, NC.  
When my order arrived,  
there was a scoop of a nasty white substance on my plate,  
and I said to the waitress, that I hadn't ordered grits.

She looked a bit confused at first, and then declared,  
"But you did order breakfast didn't you ?!  
Nobody orders grits, they just show up on your plate."

**God's grace and love are something like that – they just show up.**

Grace in Ephesians is not about **just** getting into heaven,  
but it is about the rich purpose of Christian living,  
that is all based upon who our loving God really is,  
**and what God will accomplish in the future for us.**

It means that just as God won't be surprised to see us in heaven,  
(having already chosen - destined us for heaven),  
so too God isn't surprised by the events of our lives,  
including, on-going struggles, and disappointments.

Our God is not in any way remote or cut off from us or our lives,  
but is personally involved in our lives and our living,  
so it's not by accident, fate or bad luck, but God's plan  
that leads to and is preparing us for our inheritance.

**It is a call to trust God's plan and intention to bless us, vs. 11, 14,**

In Christ we have obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him  
who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will. This is the pledge of our inheritance toward  
redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

**So how does this impact our lives and daily living?**

It means that even amid our worst disappointments or disasters,  
and as we live with struggle, trial and anxiety about the future,  
we are assured that God is with us, has a plan & good for us,  
and preparing us in advance for any hardships we may face,  
which is part of God preparing us for a glorious future.

In business, I observed a number of entrepreneur/owners gradually  
entrusting their children with responsibilities in the business,  
and by that, training & teaching and preparing their children  
day by day, experience by experience for their inheritance,  
when they would run and they would own the family business.

Just as God gave manna in the wilderness day by day, each day,  
so too God is equipping us day by day for our journey of faith  
preparing us for our promised inheritance in Christ,  
for which there is no easy way or simple shortcut  
in this process of gradual spiritual growth.

We must never forget to whom we belong, to our Father in heaven,  
and never forget just who this God is, who loves us so completely,  
and upon whose steadfast faithfulness & wisdom we can surely rely.

Our call is to trust and hope in faithfulness,  
and to bear with life's uncertainty and confusion  
by choosing to trust in the sure knowledge of God's love,  
and the assurance of God's promises fulfilled in Jesus,  
for that truly is our destination, **our destiny to be loved by God.**

Know that the LORD is *God*. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.