

Barukh Atta Adonai

Jeremiah 31:7-14 | Psalm 147:13-20 | Ephesians 1:3-14 | John 1:1-18

EPHESIANS 1:3-14

³ 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, ⁴ just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ 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, ¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³ 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; ¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

INTRODUCTION

*Barukh atta Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha-Olam.*¹ If you've ever been a guest at Shabbat dinner, you will have heard those words a few times, most likely sung. The Jewish practice of marking the sabbath, Shabbat, begins at sundown each Friday. It is more than a mere commemoration of the seventh day in which God rested from creation, it is meant to welcome God's people into sacred time, a period of time until sundown the next day in which no work is done, of course, but wherein God's people are meant meditate on his many blessings. This is why Shabbat begins with these prayers, these Jewish liturgical blessings in the form of a *berakah*. *Barukh atta Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha-Olam* ("Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe").²

As we turn to our reading from Ephesians this morning, we find such a liturgical blessing, a *berakah*, a statement of praise to God at the opening of this majestic, and yet prayerful, letter. And it is a grand statement. These 12 verses are a single sentence in Greek, consisting of 202 words—which is long, even for Paul. It is a complex sentence—you can tell by how the translators just gave up and started a new sentence every few verses. It is a rich and powerful sentence—in which we find a statement of God's profound plan for his people. The plan, succinctly put, is right there in the second line: "*He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.*"³ This is Paul's primary point—"he chose us to be holy and blameless in love." Let me see if I can make it even simpler. *He chose us for him.* And it is these two parts which are then further unpacked in two major participial phrases: "*destined us for adoption,*" and "*made known to us the mystery of his will.*" Let's take a closer look.

¹ The phrase translates to "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe." The observations about the similarities between this sentence and a *berakah* are based, in part, on the work of P.T. O'Brien in Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 88-92.

² It's an ancient practice, with many examples throughout the Old and New Testaments, both in individual settings and in liturgical. See Gen 14:20; 24:27, 1 Kgs 8:15 and 56, Ps 41:13, Ps 72:19-20, 2 Cor 1:3-4; 1 Pet 1:3-5, and others.

³ Eph 1:4-5, 8.

1. CHOSE US

We'll start where Paul started, a statement of praise: "*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...*"⁴ Notice how Paul takes this idea of *berakah*, of blessing God, and not only introduces Jesus Christ into it—"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ"—but made it Trinitarian: "*who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.*" This is no accident. Paul, as he begins this letter, draws on the widest possible foundation to assure his readers of God's plan. God, the source, who blesses us through Christ, the mediator, who works to bestow this blessing through the Spirit. And why? Why does this matter? For what purpose did the Trinitarian God choose to bless his people? So that we might be holy—that is, set apart—and blameless, righteous before him, in love. It's a bold statement in two parts, chosen by God to live in a particular way. And this is precisely what Paul unpacks with the rest of the prayer.

2. DESTINED US

First, he unpacks the *chosen* part of his thesis. He first reframes it as "*destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.*"⁵ In adoption—meaning literally becoming the sons of God through Christ—we become his family, his children, his heirs. And how? How is that we are counted as God's children? How did God bestow upon us this blessing—a blessing we most certainly don't deserve? Paul answers the question in the next verse: through redemption. We are made his children through the gospel—through the redemption won by Christ Jesus in his death and resurrection, what Paul calls "*redemption through his blood,*" and which means we are forgiven our sin.⁶ Please don't miss this. It's deceptively simple and something we state over and over again throughout our liturgy week after week. It's, sadly, too easy to become desensitized to it. But Paul, in very simple terms, unfolds God's glorious gospel plan: He chose us, he formed a plan to make us his children, and then he executed that plan, reconciling us to him through the only means possible, redemption through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, his actual Son. This was not something we deserved—for our sinfulness, our evil, our disobedience means we deserve death. But because of Christ Jesus, we get life as God's children. And this is why Paul refers to it as the "*riches of his grace.*"

3. MADE KNOWN TO US

But of course, he didn't just choose us (or destine us for adoption through redemption), he also made known to us the mystery of his will. This is, I think, how Paul begins to convey what he means from that primary point, that we are "*to be holy and blameless before him in love.*" The will he reveals to us is his "*plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him.*"⁷ Paul goes on to reiterate our status as adopted children having been given an inheritance—the Holy Spirit—who marks and seals us for our destined purpose, "*that we might live for the praise of his glory.*"⁸ Again, it's a somewhat complex framing of our basic theology—but it conveys the purpose of God's plan. He chose us for a purpose—that we might live to praise him, live in a way that is holy and righteous, so that all things may be reconciled in God in the fullness of time.

⁴ Eph 1:3.

⁵ Eph 1:5. This is not an uncommon metaphor for Paul. See Gal 4:5, Rom 8:14 and 23, and Rom 9:4.

⁶ Eph 1:7.

⁷ Eph 1:4, 10.

⁸ Eph 1:12.

Of course, you might be wondering what that last bit means: “*as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*”⁹ This is, in fact, much of what Paul works through in the rest of this letter: unifying, or reconciling, and bringing things together in God. He starts by talking about ethnic divisions—that Jews and gentiles might be brought together in him. Then he talks about the church, and how it might be unified in him: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.¹⁰ Paul even talks about the unity of husband and wife (wives submitting to their husbands—that very popular and well-loved passage of Scripture, also husbands loving their wives), the unity of parents and children (children obey your parents), and the unity even of masters and servants, all stemming from a sense of mutual submission.¹¹ This is the plan for the fullness of time: That we would live as holy and blameless people, fully reconciled, in love, and praising God.

CONCLUSION

It’s a beautiful picture, but one that still seems far off. Indeed, I would suggest it’s worth working for. Whether we are talking about the ongoing conflict between ethnicities in our world that still struggles with racism, or the ongoing conflict between opposite ends of the political spectrum on any number of issues—including pandemic restrictions, the ongoing hatred and animosity that seems to infect all public discourse, or even the ongoing conflict between husbands and wives or children and parents or employers and employees that struggle to be reconciled, let us strive toward this picture of what God has planned for the fullness of time, in which all things are gathered up in him. Let us strive for what the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* describes in its intercessory prayer: “Grant that all they that do confess thy holy Name, may agree in the truth of thy holy Word, and live in unity and godly love.”¹² In pure philosophy, there is no greater question than to contemplate one’s purpose. And there is no more likely time than now, at the very beginning of a new year, that we would ask such a question. What is my purpose? Is it work? To achieve? To be in relationship? To eat, drink, and be merry? These are all surely good things, but are they my chief end, my purpose? Or will I live in a way that recognizes what Paul said at the very beginning, God “*chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.*” He chose us for him.

As I close, I return us to the Shabbat blessings. For there we find a reminder of his glorious grace to us, and the means by which he reconciled us to himself. You see, at a Shabbat meal, the first blessing is over the candles, but the second and third blessings that begin the sabbath, the entering into a divine time of meditation on God’s blessings, are prayers over a *kiddush* cup (or a chalice of wine) and over a loaf of bread. And while the Jewish Shabbat focuses on God’s creation of these good things—as do our prayers in the preparation for the Communion table—the wine and the bread have become for us much more—transformed into symbols of redemption, the bread of life and the cup of salvation. May we, as this new year begins, enter into a divine time of meditation upon that most glorious blessing, recalling that God has chosen us for him. May he be blessed forever. *Barukh atta Adonai Eloheinu melek ha-Olam. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁹ Eph 1:10.

¹⁰ See Eph 4:4-6.

¹¹ See Eph 5:21 – 6:9. The term *servant* in 6:5-9 is often translated *slave*. I am avoiding that translation here because that term evokes certain connotations today that are not quite what slavery was in the first century.

¹² *Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 53.