

Deepening Our Intimacy with God

New Year

- It's a new year and we are truly thankful to God for being alive, and being situated in Christ, in the Triune God
- Very often, the beginning of a new year seems to carry with it a **clean slate** and a sense to rectify things, to paint things as they should be
- Some engage in **New Year Resolutions**, and at times the resolutions become new habits/patterns, and at times, the resolutions fail. Wherever you stand on this, recall that if you make resolutions that are not reliant on the Holy Spirit, even if you follow through on those resolutions by your willpower, it is still a failure
- The **mystery of the Christian walk** is that we live it by depending, not on our will power but on another, namely the Holy Spirit.
 - We live not by the sweat of our brows or the strength of our arms & backs but by relying and trusting in God...even in the uncertainties we face
- So **resolve to do what is right** but only by depending on the Holy Spirit...resolve to be more intimate with God, to intentionally carve out time to be with him, only by depending on the Holy Spirit
- Earlier this week, I was reminded of a truth from a Christian newsletter at work. **When faced with decisions or afflictions or dashed hopes, we usually want a map from God** - a clear outline of what we need to do and how things work out. Very often

though, God offers you the next step, the next thought or better said, he offers you a lamp

- In doing so, **he redirects our anxious heart back to himself, deepening the relationship between God and man.** This **gift that results in the deepening of our relationship** with God is so much more than any material gift or accomplishment or possession we have here.
- Pulling on this idea of deepening our intimacy with God, my aim, as we study together today is that
 - Your relationship with God will be deepened,
 - You are reminded of who you are
 - You are reminded of whom you belong to
 - You are pulled into an interactive budding friendship with the Triune God

Text

- Every now and then, I get the privilege to teach, and I thought it would be a good idea to slowly make our way through the book of Ephesians
- My focus will be on Eph 1:3-6 but I am reading from verse 3 to 14, for proper context
 - **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 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love**
- **5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,**
- **6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed 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 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight**
- **9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ**
- **10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.**
- **11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will,**
- **12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.**
- **13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,**
- **14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.**

Context

- A quick survey of Ephesians 1:3-14 paints an unmistakable picture:
 - Paul immediately launches into what you might call this **outburst of praise that span at least verses 3-14.**
 - In looking at the structure and language of the text, there is this **heartfelt sense of exuberance, gratitude, and pleasure that is pouring out of Paul.** You get the sense that Paul has tasted **the richness of God's grace**, and it is shown in the exuberance of the language Paul uses.
 - In the Greek, verses 3-14 is one long run on sentence (of about 202 words) that presents "**a cascading description of God's work in Christ, one after another**" (NIVAC, Ephesians)
- My aim today is to
 - Summarize the mind-blowing promises in verses 3 to 6,
 - Extract some implications, and
 - Settle in on one major application - maybe a resolution for the new year, the new decade and all of life.

The Blessings of God

Thesis Statement

- Verse 3 is the thesis statement of this son of praise from Paul. Everything in this passage is there to explain verse 3.

The Triune God in Action (vs 3)

- **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,**
- In this singular verse, **we see the initiative of the Triune God, working for your sake and my sake. Without any merit on our side, we clearly see God as the primary initiator of the blessings**
 - All blessings flow from God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
 - **Through the sacrifice and redemptive work of Christ, we are brought into this fellowship with God, in which he then blesses us “in Christ.”**
 - Essentially you can interpret the phrase “in Christ” in this passage **as that which Christ has procured for us, ushering us into the Kingdom of His father.**
 - The phrase “In Christ” or its equivalent occurs 11 times in the greek text in Eph 1:3-14. In all of Paul’s letters, the phrase “In Christ” or it’s equivalent appears about 164 times (about 36 times in Ephesians).

- To be “in Christ” is to be united with Christ, it is to be grafted into Christ, it is to submit to the Lordship of Christ.
- We see the stamp of the Holy Spirit at the beginning and ending of this song of praise. In verse 3, **the phrase “with every spiritual blessing” points to all that God’s Holy Spirit gives to enable life [“in Christ”].**
- It is the work and activity of the Holy Spirit that mediates this blessings unto us.
- Let me read verses 13-14
 - **13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,**
 - **14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.**
- We see here that the **Holy Spirit is the seal of God the father’s ownership of us, and the guarantee of the fulfillment of his promises.**
 - Said another way, the **Holy Spirit is the deposit, and proof that the Triune God will redeem us, unfailingly**

Implication

- Why are these verses showing us the work of the Triune God for us, even before we were born.
 - It is to make us realize a simple truth - **We matter to God!!! You and I matter to God**

- He has placed immense value on us - NOT because we are deserving. In fact we are not, yet he loves us
- The only point of this love though is that we become more and more intimate with him. Said another way, the point of his love for us is to deepen our trust in Him, for the sake of us becoming more and more like Him
- Let me clarify the meaning of blessing in this text.
 - The phrase “with every spiritual blessing” does not suggest otherworldly gifts or material gifts (of which we most readily think about) or even the spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 12, although it can be inclusive of all of these.
 - **The blessings Paul speaks about is what God has provided with His Holy Spirit and in Christ Jesus**
 - In the immediate context of this passage, the blessings are not material nor spiritual gifts. We will touch on some of them today
 - **Paul’s statement of blessings from God is just as true if his audience were enduring intense persecution or if they were abounding in plenty.**

The Blessings

- **Verse 3 is the thesis statement of this song of praise that shows the activity of the Triune God to bless us.**
- **The rest of the verses are enumerations of the different blessings that God lavishes upon us, springing from the activity of the Triune God.**

- We will cover 2 of such blessings today

Election: the proof of His love (vs 4a)

- **4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him**
- This verse is quite clear in what it is saying but it is hard to wrap our heads around it.
This is what is known as the doctrine of election
- **The doctrine of election is a hard one to explain and a harder one to digest**
 - Perhaps the reason why is that **we are trying to use human language, constrained by the passage of time, as a feeble attempt to describe realities that exist beyond time.**
- With our limited understanding, **election means that the existence of God's people (the body of Christ) is solely based on God's plan and action.**
 - This means that God made us his own, purely based on his sovereign will, apart from human influence
 - **Who does he choose? How does he choose? Does this mean he chooses one person and not another? I don't know.**
 - There are simply things I do not think we will fully understand on this side of life, and I think the ins and outs of election is one of them
- **While our passage this morning speaks of election as a corporate term, where we (the body of Christ) are chosen in Christ, there are other passages in scripture that**

clearly call out election in a personal way (such as Romans 8:33, 2 Thess 2:13, John 15:16, Acts 13:48, Romans 8:29-30, 2 Tim 1:9, 1 Peter 1:2, etc.)

- In addition, **scripture speaks to an established pattern where God chooses a man, Noah, and then later on Abraham, and then chooses a nation, Israel, from whom will come His chosen one, Christ...through whom we, the body of Christ become the elect of God.**
 - **Election is woven through the human history**
- **At the same time, it is clear from scripture that somehow human responsibility is a part of this**
 - In John 6:37, Jesus said, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37).
 - Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. (John 7:17)
 - Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "**Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.**" (Mark 8:34)
- Now I have just said God chooses us without any human influence. I am also saying that we are somehow involved in that process.
- Of course to the human brain, **I have just spoken out of both sides of my mouth as those two statements seem to be in conflict but be rest assured, in the mind of God, it is fully reconciled**

- **Election was not given to us to cause controversy. Election doesn't nullify human responsibility, neither is it set against it.**
 - **The Bible doesn't reconcile this tension for us, but focuses on God as the author of divine election and its purpose**
 - **Election is clearly identified in scripture, so is human responsibility. You cannot eliminate either of them from scripture.**
- **In dealing with election, if our focus is so much on the idea that *"if God has chosen some and not others, why does he still hold unrepentant sinners accountable"*, then maybe our real issue is that of control.**
 - We have a tendency to want to be in control, to know the levers we can pull, to resolve all uncertainties so we can control outcomes.
 - **We want to be in control and through election, God says otherwise**
- **The tendency to ask how much of salvation is God's part and how much is our part, is misguided, as it is based on the assumption that human beings and God stand in isolation**
 - **Salvation is entirely a work of God in which humans are invited into and are totally involved.**
- **If our concern is about fairness/equity, in that we look at the issue election and we are thinking about how fair is God in carrying out election, let me say two quick things about that**
 - First of all, none of us ever wants what is fair when we stand before God. You don't want fairness or equity before God. You want his mercy and grace

- It is an illusion that seeking fairness before God will somehow save you. No, it will result in your destruction, mine and every other person.
- **Why? Because we are sinners and we have no place to stand, save Salvation which comes through election.**
 - We are depraved beings and we have no leg to stand before a righteous God. Even our acts of true repentance must be washed by the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross.
- **Secondly, if what your concern is about some sense of equity, then be rest assured that if you, a depraved mortal has some sense of equity, the Triune God, in whom there is no darkness, the righteous judge of all, One whose integrity knows no end, is more than fair.**
- **Let us lay aside the arguments, and see that God does choose us and yet we have a responsibility unto Holiness, praising God for the value he has placed on us and the grace He has shown us.**

Implication

- Election isn't a strange doctrine, it actually speaks of grace. Election should prompt us to be joyfully, because it speaks of God's love for us
- Two implications of election
 - As Christians, we need to realize that our faith rests "**completely on the work of God and not on the unsteady foundation of anything in themselves. It is all the Lord's work, and in accordance with his plan, a plan that reaches back**

before the foundation of the world. There is, therefore, no place for human boasting” (TNTC Ephesians)

- **This shows our value to God**
- **It also shows the value of God’s glory - his mercy and grace.** As his enemies, he, rather than punish us, has instead made us valuable with him. Election shows us both our value and the worth of God, at once!
- **The purpose of election is unto holiness** (cf. 5:27 and Col. 1:22)
 - **To be clear holiness doesn’t mean you are morally perfect. Rather it means you are set apart for God**
 - **Holiness is not a list of the do's and don'ts rather, it is taking on the nature of God. To say it another way, holiness means you take on the nature of God i.e. you are being conformed into Christlikeness**
 - **This is why Romans 8:29 says we are ‘predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son’ (Rom. 8:29).**
 - **Therefore our purpose is to be conformed to the image of God (cf Romans 8:28-30) or said another way, our purpose and the point of election is that we glorify God and enjoy him forever (by taking on his nature)**
- **By the way, this purpose God has in mind for you is simply mind blowing.**
- **Think of it... God wants me and you to become like Christ! To take on his nature, to think like he thinks and acts like he acts.**

- **God looks at us mortal beings and says I want them to be eternal beings and are reflections of the One in whom I am well pleased, my anointed One. There is no higher distinction God could have given us than this**
- So the question I have to ask you is this - **how seriously are you taking the calling on your life to become more Christlike?**
 - **As you plan for the year and make your resolutions in other areas of life, are you planning for growth in Christ?**
 - **Do you yearn for Christ to become Lord and Savior in your life? Are you planning to carve out time to intentionally grow in God.**
 - **What is your plan to reduce sin in your life?**
 - Of course, we do not do any of this by our strength but by the Help of the Holy Spirit. **However, it is not that we are waiting on God...God is waiting on you and me to get serious with our intimacy with Him**

Sonship by Adoption (vs 4b-6)

- **In love, 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,**
- **6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.**
- We were created for fellowship with God, as seen in Genesis, but through sin and our rebellious nature, we forfeited that privilege.

- **And here comes the foreordained plan of God in action - in the person of Christ, through his life, the bloody sacrifice on the cross, and his resurrection, he through grace, became the atonement for our sins, and imputed his righteousness unto us, thereby making reconciliation with God possible (John 1:12).**
- And so the language of adoption is appropriate here (cf Romans 8:15, 23, and Gal 4:5).
- **In our world, anyone adopted has their position by grace and not by right...yet they are on the same footing as those born into the family**
- **The only one born of God is Christ Jesus...and God offers us the same standing as Christ, who is His firstborn (cf Acts 26:23, Rom 8:29, 1 Cor 15:20, Col 1:15-18, Rev 1:5).
Imagine that!**
- All of this God did according to the purpose of his will - and again we come in contact with the doctrine of election, something God has foreordained.
 - **he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will**
- God does all of this to the praise of his glorious grace, which carries the same meaning as what we said about our purpose i.e. we exist to glorify God forever (by taking on his nature), which is exactly the same thing as holiness and the same thing as becoming Christlike

Implication

- **I hope you are seeing the extent of God's love for you. I hope you can in concrete terms see how much God values you.**

- The phrase “**purpose of his will**” in **In love, 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will**, speaks of God making a plan about you and me joyfully, with delight, with good pleasure
- **All that God is giving to you, all these blessings, he gives not as a grumpy old man but with deep pleasure and joy!**
 - **Let that sink in, the plan of God for your life, your conformity to his son’s likeness, the depth of his love for you, the grace he lavishes upon you bringing you into his family - all of that, God does with great delight and joy**
- **The reason I am calling this out is so you know how much you are loved. And by extension, I hope you see that this love is not based on your goodness or your merit.**
- So again my question to you is this - **how seriously are you taking the love of God for you? In the face of rejection and hurt, do you go back to his love? And when all seems to be going well, is your trust in his love or in his gifts?**

Applications

Prayer

- **Now that we have seen the incredible blessings of God to us, what does this mean? We have seen the extent of his love for us, and how much we matter to him.**

- **There are a lot of applications we could draw from this text such as the subject of hope, and identity. I do pray that as we have gone through the aforementioned text, you are seeing different applications to where you are**
- **In light of this, what then shall we do? What is our part to play?**
- **May I suggest that we respond both now and continually with Prayer.** It sounds so simple, yet there is so much to prayer than simply speaking to God.
 - **To be clear, prayer does include speaking to God, but it is primarily an avenue God has graced us with, to deepen our intimacy with Him**

Misguided Views on Prayer

- We tend to think of prayer in a transactional way - we see prayer as something we do in order to make God produce the results we want
- As you can imagine there are a number of books devoted to techniques of prayer and how to get your prayers answered. **This approach to prayer as a tool we leverage to get the outcomes we desire, shows the controlling and manipulative posture of our hearts**
- This is why our prayers tend to be a shopping list of things to be accomplished; things we think we need
- These misguided views of prayer can actually make prayer [which should bring us into deeper intimacy with God] a manipulative way for us to avoid entering into a deep, and transforming relationship with God.

- If I could borrow from 2 Tim 3:5, prayer, done the wrong way can become “**an appearance of godliness**” but we deny its transforming “**power**”
- **Prayer done the right way is an archeological exploration into our hearts, where we are offering ourselves to God, to become who he intends us to be.**
- Due to our fallen nature, at times [maybe most times], what God wants for us, will be contrary to who we want to be and what we want to strive for, and so begins the wrestling match.
- Will our prayers be the radical act of increasingly giving up ourselves or will we run back to the false structures of safety we have built?
- **Are we willing to give up our old selves for the new that Christ offers? Are we willing to give up the patterns of our old selves carefully constructed to seem pious on the outside, while our insides are like white washed tombs?**
- And all this we do - this manipulative approach to prayer - while forgetting
 - **“... your Father knows what you need before you ask him”** in Matt 6:8
 - **“Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all”** Matt 6:31-32
- Another misguided view of prayer, that shows our controlling nature, is that we take scriptures that more or less say “**whatever you ask in prayer or whatever you ask in my name**” (cf Matt 21:22, Mk 11:22-24, Jn 15:7, 16, etc.) to mean a blank check is given to us, and the requirements to cash the check is to slap the name “Jesus” at the end of every sentence in prayer or at the end of the prayer

- **We somehow ignore that the prayers Jesus prayed, and the prayers in scripture, do not actually include slapping the name of Jesus at the end of prayer as a magic word**
- **I am not saying it is necessarily wrong to verbally add the name of Christ at the end of a prayer. I am saying it is not simply the verbal pronouncement, esp if we don't understand what it means.** In fact the verbal pronouncement of adding Jesus name to a prayer is not necessary
- To pray in the name of Christ, means you are aligned with him, asking for his sake, in accordance to his will and for his purpose.
 - **Are my prayers actually for the sake of Christ?**
- **The command to ask anything we want is always bounded by the requirement that we are actually in Him i.e. we are aligned to him and praying according to his will**

How then should we pray

- When Jesus' disciples asked this question, he taught them a prayer - not as something for them to recite or a structure to follow. **I say this because when Jesus will subsequently pray in the garden and on the cross, he didn't follow the format he laid down. So what was he teaching them?**
- **The prayer he taught was more about showing them a model and that's why he said this is "how you should pray" not what you should pray.** It is not a structure to follow but a model that should guide how we pray.

- We do not have time to delve into the model but here are some central themes from the model Jesus establishes
 - The centrality and reference point of the prayer is God and His will.
 - If we want to be technical, the first three petitions focuses on God's will being done - which should say something of the orientation of our prayers
 - The next set of requests - daily bread, forgiveness of sins, avoiding temptation - while they do include what we need and our desires, I hope you see the orientation of these requests and is still primarily about living in accordance to His will
- **How we pray, and by extension what we pray for, is often a reflection of the reality of our relationship with God**
- **You could go as far as defining prayer as the reality of our relationship with God.**

True Nature of Prayer

- Prayer should be the act by which we empty ourselves of all false belongings for the sake of becoming more intimate with the Triune God.
 - It is where we progressively lay down our agendas, our need for control, the outcomes we so desperately want, and increasingly take up our cross, and follow Christ Joyfully
 - Prayer is truly a radical act, because it requires us to examine not only the external manifestation of our lives but the inner reality that undergirds it.

- In prayer, we get to examine our thoughts and how we think.
- For example, Nick has been teaching about the idols of our heart, and focusing on wealth. **In prayer, we should examine our hearts to see which idols own us, and to whom we bow**
- It isn't that we do not pray for our needs or even wants, but in prayer, the wants and needs we ask for, becomes the platform through which we continuously examine our hearts and inner structures of our lives
- Life is hard and sometimes tough. Difficulties abound
 - Whether in marriage and all the potential pitfalls of two people coming together
 - In parenting, where you are responsible for a human soul, and yet you cannot and should not exert control beyond a certain extent
 - In wrestling with the passing of a loved one
 - Confusion about your purpose or who you,
 - The seeming unrelenting struggle against sin,
 - In the longings of your heart that have not yet been fulfilled...and maybe won't be fulfilled
 - In facing an unfavorable diagnosis from a doctor
- Please pray for these things, ask God, cry aloud to him and wrestle with him.
 - However, all of the above must become the crucible through which your relationship is being deepened with Him - where your faith is refined as gold which has been purified by fire

- Let me read some quotes on prayer that might help us with a holistic vision of prayer
 - **Prayer is the outgrowth of both silence and solitude. In silence we let go of our manipulative control. In solitude we face up to what we are in the depths of our being. Prayer then becomes the offering of who we are to God: the giving of that broken, unclean, grasping, manipulative self to God for the work of God's grace in our lives.** (*Invitation to a Journey* by M. Robert Mulholland)
- I do not mean to live you on a somber note but I **hope you see that when we engage God through prayer the right way, it becomes a fountain of Joy - the deepest kind of Joy, which has its source in the Triune God.**
- **As our intimacy with God deepens, so does our joy in Him - a joy, which values the eternal over the temporal; the type of joy and overwhelming satisfaction in God, that transcends successes and failures, afflictions, unfavorable diagnosis, broken relationships, etc.**
- When we pray as we should, intimacy with God becomes life giving.
- **You might be concerned with the idea of unburdening your heart to God. Does he really care about this little tiff I had with my or this silly anxious thoughts? He knows of it already and he truly wants to be a part of all your life, maybe especially in the mundane things**
- **God already knows all that you struggle with, and your prayer is an invitation for him to step into it. God loves to communion with you, if you will be so willing to carve out some time for the One you call Savior and Lord.**

New Year Request

- So in this new year, please make prayer a staple of your life. As you make plans in other areas of your life, whether in the new year or at any other time, please take seriously your relationship with God
- Take practical steps to pray and pray often. For me, I like to write down themes of what to pray about and I use reminders to pull me away from the current of my daily life
- If you are struggling with how to practically engage God more in prayer, perhaps do the following
 - Set out a concrete time in the morning and/or evening
 - Pick a comfortable place to be in
 - Unburden your heart before him - speak to him as you would a friend. Use the model Jesus taught on how (not what) to pray
 - Maybe have a journal and write in it. You can write your distracting thoughts and your prayers in there
- **Take seriously your relationship with God. Just as you commit resources to plan for your family, your career, your vacations, please apply the same zeal to your relationship with God. Get into the right community** - shameless plugs for homegroups and DNA groups or any other community that is truly life giving

- **Plan for your growth in God, not by your willpower or strength but by creating a space for you to behold the face of God, so that you are increasingly transformed into His likeness (2 Cor 3:18)**

Homework

- Meditatively read through Matt 6 and see what Jesus says about prayer (and other spiritual practices like fasting, and what we treasure), and compare that to how and why we pray
- How can you make prayer a consistent feature of your life?
 - If you are struggling with how to practically engage God more in prayer, perhaps do the following
 - Set out a concrete time in the morning and/or evening
 - Pick a comfortable place to be in
 - Unburden your heart before him - speak to him as you would a friend. Use the model Jesus taught on how (not what) to pray
 - Maybe have a journal and write in it. You can write your distracting thoughts and your prayers in there