FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 11**:** 1-9

SECOND LESSON: Ephesians 1:3-14

July 14, 2024

***“Beyond Our Understanding”***

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There are a surprising number of things in life we can’t explain or describe. They are beyond our understanding, beyond what we have words or concepts for. What color is happiness? Try to describe the taste of water. Explain the concept of “nothing.” How can we describe music to someone born deaf? What does the color blue look like? What is time? Who made God? And of course, the ever important question—why doesn’t Tarzan have a beard?

This passage that we just read from the New Testament is about things beyond our understanding. It is so dense, so packed full of words and concepts, and so foreign to our world, that we many of us are tempted to just give up before we even start. English versions break it up, but in the original Greek it’s actually one exceptionally long run-on sentence! It’s for this reason that I did not read the NIV version today, but instead read from a contemporary translation called “The Message.” “The Message isn’t very good for word studies because it paraphrases so much, but it does tend to be good at cutting to the heart of the matter. I don’t usually do this because I’m a word study kind of a person, but today it is more important that you get the overall meaning. Having said that, I am now going to proceed to take it apart!

Many scriptures are practical. They concern things we need to DO. This scripture is different. This is about what God **has done**, and God’s eternal plan from the beginning. This passage attempts to put into words that which can’t really be put into words. It is about the eternal divine intentions and work of God.

We begin by praising God for the many blessings God placed in our lives. God chose us before the creation of the world! Or as The Message puts it, “Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love.” Paul says that God chose us not only before we were born, **but before creation**—when there was only God. Does this make sense to us? Of course not, because we can only think in linear time. God, on the other hand, exists outside of time.

Time is a created thing. But everything we do, say and think is constricted by the structure of time. There is before and after. There is first this happened and then the next thing happened. We can’t live or speak in a way that ignores time. But the Creator God does not have our limitations and chooses different things for different purposes. Before and after doesn’t really exist in the eternal NOW. To the best of our ability when we seek to decipher the meaning of God’s most ancient of names, Yahweh, we are left with, “I am what I am” as well as “what I was” and “what I will be.” Past, present and future are all woven together. We say God decided to create us and to save us as a past decision and a present or future reality because we have no other way to express God’s eternal plan.

The scripture also says that God predestined us to be adopted into God’s family through Jesus Christ. The Message manages to skip the word predestination, neatly avoiding it because it comes preloaded with all kinds of assumptions. In our world we get tangled up in individualistic doctrines of predestination. Some people are predestined for heaven. Others are predestined to go to hell. No one really has any choice. God is arbitrary, holy and to be feared. But this is not what this scripture is saying. That is fatalism, not the plans of God. It also reflects a bias towards the individual that was foreign to the ancient world. Paul was talking about groups of people. What Paul was saying is that while God chose the Jews first, God planned all along to bring in everyone else. And adoption in the ancient world was not considered a second class means of entering a family. An adopted child was in every way equal to other members of the family. And God did this “in accordance with his pleasure and will.” God did it because it made God happy.

The scripture goes on to say that we have been given redemption through Jesus’ blood and the forgiveness of sins. Again, we think we know what this means, but we are so culturally removed from the original context that our ideas are little more than a hollow echo. Redemption is about slavery. We don’t live with slavery today. We don’t eat, drink and sleep the reality of three quarters of the population being enslaved. At one point the Roman empire considered the idea of making slaves dress differently from free people. They quickly abandoned the idea when they realized that once the slaves knew they were in the majority, they would revolt. Slaves were redeemed. Their freedom was purchased. A slave could even manage to pull this off for themselves if they were fortunate enough to be in a position where they were occasionally paid. It would take years, but the slave could bank his or her money at a local temple, and when enough money was accumulated technically that god or goddess would “purchase” them with the saved money, and they would be freed. This is the practice behind Paul’s redemption imagery. Prisoners of war were redeemed if their government wanted them badly enough to pay money for them. Redeemed is about being set free from slavery. But almost immediately Paul slides into another image without any effort at all when he refers to Jesus’ blood and forgiveness of sins. This comes straight from temple sacrifice. These are two entirely different metaphors for how salvation works and here they are simply blended together.

Paul also speaks about mysteries being made known to us. To the degree that we are able to comprehend what God has done, God has revealed it to us. There are deep spiritual matters here. We are like little children trying to understand things way beyond our grasp, and yet God works to break it down to us in pieces we can apprehend. And the central message is this: We are eternally loved. We’re not an afterthought. We’re a forethought. And when the time was right God sent Jesus into the world to begin the plan of salvation. The salvation of the world is in process. God desires to “bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” Everything, all of creation is included in God’s plan, and our salvation is part of a much larger whole.

Finally, verses 13-14 expresses ideas in terms that are borrowed from the world of business. The NIV says, “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you 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.” The Message sounds a little less technical. It says, “It’s in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This down payment from God is the first installment on what’s coming, a reminder that we’ll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.”

The Penn Wynne Presbyterian Church has an old seal. I use it to impress a mark onto marriage licenses. It makes them official. If you have ever had anything notarized, you will notice they also use a seal. This comes from a very ancient practice of sealing documents by making an impression with wax. Seals could also be dipped in ink and pressed on paper or pressed into clay. A seal is a legal signature.

We have been “sealed” by God. We legally belong to God, not the devil, and no one can take us away. Our seal, however, is not a mark. It is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. We have been given the Holy Spirit to work within us as a sort of first divine installment. We are not totally free of sin yet, but we have the Spirit to help us. We are still in this world, but a new heaven and a new earth awaits. The Holy Spirit is a down payment of God’s promise to us. The language of business and trade may sound jarring to us, but Paul found it to be a useful analogy.

God’s plan is vast, throughout time and space. God’s desire for creation is to bring healing, redemption, wholeness and salvation. God decided to give us the ability to choose good or evil, but God also chose to rescue us. Can we understand it? No. Followers of John Calvin have tried to make it a nice and neat system, all clearly spelled out and logical, but truly it is a mystery. All we can really say is that before we were even created, God knew us, loved us and decided to save us. God has a plan for our lives, and God will never let us go. Amen.

# Isaiah 11: 1-9

1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
    from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.  
2The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—  
    the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
    the Spirit of counsel and of might,  
    the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—  
3and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,  
    or decide by what he hears with his ears;  
4but with righteousness he will judge the needy,  
    with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.  
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;  
    with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.  
5Righteousness will be his belt  
    and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

6The wolf will live with the lamb,

# the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together;     and a little child will lead them. 7The cow will feed with the bear,     their young will lie down together,     and the lion will eat straw like the ox. 8The infant will play near the cobra’s den,     and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest. 9They will neither harm nor destroy     on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord     as the waters cover the sea.

Ephesians 1:3-14 The Message

**3-6**How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He’s the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

**7-10**Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we’re a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. *Abundantly* free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.

**11-12**It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

**13-14**It’s in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This down payment from God is the first installment on what’s coming, a reminder that we’ll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.

# Ephesians 1:3-14

**3**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. **4**For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love **5**he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— **6**to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. **7**In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace **8**that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding,**9**he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, **10**to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

**11**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, **12**in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. **13**And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, **14**who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.