Ephesians

Lesson Two

**Intro**

Ephesians was written circa 61-62 A.D. while Paul was in a Roman prison awaiting a Roman ruling on the allegation that Christianity should be banned by the Roman Emperor. In the face of this pressure, Paul affirms his allegiance to Jesus Christ, Jesus’ status as Messiah, Lord, and part of the triune God. Despite Paul’s difficult circumstances, in Eph. 1:3-14 Paul asserts that he and the Ephesians should praise the triune God for bestowing the following spiritual blessings:

* God the Father’s selection of believers to be holy and blameless in Christ
* God the Father’s adoption of believers as family through Christ
* Redemption and forgiveness of believers’ sins through Christ’s sacrificial death
* Abundant grace, including the revelation of God the Father’s plan to unite all things in heaven and earth under Christ’s headship, in due time
* Being chosen by God the Father, who works everything in accordance with his will, to be part of Christ’s inheritance
* Being sealed with the Holy Spirit as a sign/guarantee that believers will receive all the promised spiritual benefits

**Implications of Eph. 1:3-14**

A question that naturally follows from Paul’s assertion that God the Father chose believers before creation even began is whether human choice plays any part in whether a person believes/has faith or rejects/has no faith God’s grace. Based on pure logic, without looking at any other scripture, it would be easy to argue that if God chose believers, and if the Holy Spirit seals believers, then human choice is irrelevant or, said another way, an illusion because all the decisions any human makes are actually determined solely by God.

As evangelicals who believe all scripture is inspired and inerrant, (2 Tim. 3:16), it is important to consider all the scripture concerning a topic before deciding how far the logical implications of any single verse or passage can be taken. In other words, logic is good, but if the logical implications of a single verse conflict with the clear text of other biblical passages, then logical implications must give way to clear biblical text.

Verses indicating human choices are not illusory, i.e., determined solely by God alone:

Ezekiel 18:23, 31-32 Do I delight in the death of the wicked, declares the Sovereign LORD, and not prefer that he turn from his wicked conduct and live? . . . Get rid of all your transgressions and make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no delight in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!

Luke 13:34 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate.

The emotion/dismay/disappointment the Lord expresses in these verses indicates that human choice is not illusory and, when humans choose to reject the Lord, causes the Lord to experience real grief. This grief is consistent with verses indicating that God desires all to experience salvation:

1 Timothy 2:3-4 Such prayer for all is good and welcomed before God our savior, since he wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Because Revelation clearly indicates that many people will reject God’s offer of salvation, the Bible teaches that some things God desires/wishes (such as for every human to repent and experience salvation) would occur that do not actually occur. In other words, there are things God desires/wishes that are not part of the things he decrees/determines will actually occur.

This prompts the question: Why would an omnipotent God choose/decree for things that are not his most preferred option to occur? I don’t know of a Bible verse that tries to directly answer this question, so we have to speculate. My speculation is that the answer involves God’s choice/decree to give some of his creatures such as humans the ability to make real choices. Our ability to make choices results in God’s chosen/decreed course of history including things that make God sad, i.e., He wishes were not part of the plan. But even those things are incorporated into His plan.

With regard to salvation, I humbly submit the biblical data presents both God’s choice and human choice as necessary aspects in determining whether a person believes. In other words, no one accepts God’s offer of salvation without God’s intervention, but the Bible also indicates that faith is a conscious choice made by people.

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| God’s role in salvation process | A person’s role in salvation process |
| Elects/chooses person to experience salvation before creation. Eph. 1:4-5, 11; Rom. 8:29; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2 |  |
| Draws/effectively calls person toward repentance and conversion. John 6:44; Acts 2:39; Rom. 8:30 | Responds to Holy Spirit’s conviction by becoming remorseful/recognizing need for grace. Acts 2:37 |
| Justifies person by applying Christ’s righteousness at conversion. Rom. 5:1; 1 Cor. 6:11 | Listens to good news that forgiveness is available through faith in Jesus. Rom. 10:17; Eph. 1:13; 1 Thess. 2:13 |
| Regenerates person’s spirit at conversion, i.e., causes them to be born again/from above. John 3:5-8; Titus 3:4-6;  | Repents/Believes/Confesses sinfulness, need for salvation, and faith in Jesus to provide salvation. John 3:16-18; Acts 2:38; Rom. 10:9-11;  |
| Sanctifies person by causing them to become progressively more holy. 1 Thess. 5:23-24 |  |
| Enables person to persevere/stand firm in their faith. Rom. 14:4; 2 Cor. 1:21-22 | Stands firm/perseveres by continuing to exercise faith in Jesus. Phil. 3:12-14; Heb. 4:14;  |
| Glorifies person by giving them a new eternal and sin-free body. Rom. 8:30; 1: Cor. 15:51-55; Rev. 21:3-7. |  |

One way scripture maintains a constant tension between God’s sovereign control/election is by stating that God does a certain thing for believers, while also urging the recipient of a letter to make an effort to do that same thing, and even warning of consequences if the person does not make such an effort:

 Scripture says God makes believers stand firm in their faith:

2 Cor. 1:21-22: Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hears as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

 Scripture also contains multiple exhortations to people to make an effort to stand firm by exercising ongoing faith, and even warns those who do not do so should not feel assured that they are a genuine believer:

2 Cor. 1:24: Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

Eph. 6:12: Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

Heb. 10:26-27 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sin is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Because scripture consistently portrays both God and humans as having a necessary and sometimes decisive-sounding role in a person’s faith journey, I think the best approach is to acknowledge there are tensions between the implications of these verses that are beyond our ability to explain, but we affirm the truth of both sets of verses: (1) God chooses and preserves believers; and (2) people choose whether to have and maintain faith in the grace God offers. How those things can both be equally true is, at this point, still a mystery.

By affirming the truth of the first set, we can encourage believers experiencing difficulty in this life. Conversely, if you deny the first set, then God is not in control and there is no guarantee that God can fulfill any of his promises.

By affirming the truth of the second set, we can encourage nonbelievers that God loves them, wants them to experience salvation, and that, with God’s help, they can accept God’s gift of salvation through Jesus. Conversely, if you deny this second set of verses, then humans are mere robots, none of our decisions matter, and God is arbitrarily forcing some people to reject Him.

**Eph. 1:15-23 Thanking God for the Ephesians’ faith and praying for them**

Paul often follows the greeting with a few verses of thanksgiving for the recipient, (1 Cor. 1:4-9; Phil. 1:3-6), so it is not surprising that he follows the passage praising God for spiritual blessings with a prayer of thanksgiving for the Ephesians and supplication on their behalf. It is a 169-word sentence in Greek.

“For this reason, I also having heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and the love toward all the saints, I never cease giving thanks for you.” “For this reason” is the transition from the previous passage and indicates that the Ephesians’ receipt of the spiritual blessings discussed in 1:3-14 does not just prompt Paul to praise God, but also to thank God for the Ephesians. More specifically Paul mentions “hearing about their faith in the Lord Jesus” as a basis for thanksgiving. Some secular scholars think this is an odd thing for Paul to say since he was one of the founders of the Ephesian church. But there are a couple of plausible explanations. One is that as much as 5-6 years had passed since Paul had been in Ephesus and so he is referring to hearing reports of their continued, active faith in Jesus. Another possibility is that more people in that area had come to faith since Paul had been there. Paul could even have both possibilities in mind. Note that Paul commends them for their faith in the Lord Jesus, which is very trinitarian. If Paul did not view God the Father and Jesus and sharing one nature, this would be blasphemy. Another reason Paul gives thanks for the Ephesians is their love for all the believers in the Ephesian area. Obviously, evangelism and outreach are essential parts of the church mission. (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8.) But sacrificial love for all other believers is also an essential command, (1 John 4:11-12, 20-21), and, when it happens, supports outreach by making the church attractive to people looking for healthy community. Paul says that he “never ceases giving thanks” for the Ephesians. Paul does not mean he prays for the Ephesians nonstop, like a filibuster. He prays for them regularly on an ongoing basis, and implies that he will continue to do so.

“making mention of you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the spirit of insight and revelation in the knowledge of him.” Paul transitions to what he asks God to give the Ephesians. Paul describes God the Father as the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, showing that even though both members of the trinity share a divine nature, they are also distinct persons, and Jesus submits to God the Father. Paul prays that God the Father will give the Ephesians a “spirit of insight and understanding.” Scholars debate whether Paul is using spirit in the sense of (1) a gift or ability or (2) a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Other verses refer to the Holy Spirit with phrases such as “the spirit of truth” (John 15:26) or the “spirit of his Son” (Gal. 4:6). Also, the Holy Spirit is said to reveal hidden insight or wisdom in 1 Cor. 2:6-16, so it seems likely that Paul is asking God to give the Ephesians further manifestations of wisdom and revelation from the Holy Spirit to help them know God the Father better. Paul earlier cited insight/wisdom and understanding into the plan of salvation as part of the spiritual blessing of grace already bestowed on the Ephesians. Here, he is talking about insight and revelation into God Himself, i.e. getting to know God better. This reflects the already/not yet nature of the current age. God the Father has already bestowed the spiritual benefit of adoption, but in this lifetime we can and should strive to get to know Him better.

“since the eyes of your heart have been enlightened.” Commentators disagree how to connect this clause. I thought the most persuasive explanation is that this phrase acknowledges that Ephesians have already experienced an enlightenment that allows them to perceive spiritual truth as evidence by their repentance and faith. The phrase implies that this initial enlightenment is an important predicate for Paul’s request that their knowledge of and relationship with God will deepen.

“in order that you might know (1) what is the hope of his calling (2) what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and (3) what is the surpassing greatness of his power toward us who believe according to the mighty working of his power.” The motive or goal of Paul’s request for the Ephesians to know God better is to better appreciate three things, beginning with “the hope of his calling.” This refers back to God the Father’s choice or effective calling of the Ephesians to be believers, which should be a source of hope and confidence concerning the future.

“the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints.” “Wealth” could be translated “abundance.” This phrase describes believers as God’s glorious inheritance. Paul is requesting that the Ephesians would develop a better appreciation for the high value God places on believers as His inheritance. Earlier Paul says that the Holy Spirit put a seal marking divine possession or ownership on believers. An inheritance is a valuable possession that most people try to protect. If God views believers as His inheritance, that should encourage believers to have confidence that God will bring them into His kingdom.

“the surpassing greatness of his power toward us who believe according to the mighty working of his power” The third item is an appreciation of God’s power. Paul uses two modifiers “surpassing” and “great” to try to convey the unimaginable extent of God’s power. The preposition “toward” probably means that power is available for believers. Paul then further describes that power with the terms “working” or “energy”; “might” or “dominion”; and “strength” or “power”. Paul has basically exhausted the Greek thesaurus in his effort to convey the extent and effectiveness of God’s power. Paul then specifies some of the ways God has used this incredible power.

“which power he exercised in Christ by raising him from the dead and by seating him at his right hand in the heavenly realms above every ruler and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.” God demonstrated his surpassing power by (1) raising Christ from the dead and (2) seating Christ at God the Father’s right hand in the heavenly realms above every ruler and authority and power and dominion; both being seated in God the Father’s presence and the position of being at His right hand are unique honors showing the delegation of authority that justifies referring to Jesus as THE Lord. Paul makes this point expressly by asserting that Jesus’s current station is above every “arche” or “ruler”; every “exousia” or “authority”; every “dunamis” or “power”; and every “kuristes” or “lordship.” Paul used similar terms in 1 Cor. 15:24 and Col. 1:16. Scholars disagree whether Paul is referring to human or angelic authorities and whether they are good or evil. Hoehner argues that the discussion of spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6:12 indicates Paul is thinking of evil spiritual authorities. But I do not see anything in the context requiring the list in Eph. 1:21 to be limited to a category. Paul seems to be trying to convey that Jesus has been placed above every authority apart from the God the Father, whether human or spiritual, good or evil, as shown by the following clause: “and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.” Here, the names are bestowed by God the Father, and the title He has bestowed on Jesus is higher than the title God has or will give to anyone else.

“and he subjected everything under his feet.” This is an allusion to Psalm 8:6, where the Psalmists says that the Lord made humanity ruler over creation. The NT writers understood that this status was lost to a large extent in the fall, but regained through the elevation of Jesus. (Heb. 2:5-9; 1 Pet. 3:22.) Here and in 1 Cor. 15:27 it is God the Father whose power subjects everything to Jesus. This consistent with Jesus’s statement during his trial that his kingdom (i.e., authority) is not of this world. (John 18:36.) Note also that Psalm 8 describes humanity’s place as a “little lower than the heavenly beings” whereas Paul and the author of Hebrews clearly view Jesus’s current place as higher than earthly and spiritual beings. Paul recognized, however, that in the present age Jesus has not yet forced all enemies to fully submit to God the Father’s authority, that is still future. (1 Cor. 15:24-28.)

“and he gave him as head over everything to the church, which (indeed) is his body, the fullness of him who is being filled entirely.” This clause describes another relate, demonstration of God the Father’s power: He gave Jesus—the head over everything in creation (except God the Father)—to the church. The word translated as “church” is a common Greek word (ekklesia) generally meaning “assembly.” It is not a technical term of art, so its meaning depends on context. When used by NT writers, it could mean a local house church, or it could refer to the entire group of people who follow Jesus. Here, the noun being singular (i.e. the church, not churches) and context indicates Paul is thinking of all believers, sometimes referred to as the universal church, and his point is that God the Father demonstrated His power by giving this (in Paul’s day) relatively small, poor, scattered, and persecuted group of people a champion (Jesus) who is head or pre-eminent over everything else in creation.

The word Greek word “kephale” can mean a human’s physical head or it can be used figuratively to mean the individual who is in charge of something. After using the figurative meaning, Paul takes advantage of the literal meaning by describing the assembly as Christ’s body. For a human to survive, the head must remain connected to the body and vice-versa. This metaphor communicates a very tight relationship between Jesus’s followers and their champion/head Christ. Believers can take comfort from this metaphor because it implies that our champion Jesus cannot/will not abandon us, just as a head cannot be separate from the body. The metaphor also reminds, however us, that the church is utterly dependent on its leader, Jesus, just as a body cannot survive or function without its head.

The last phrase “the fullness of him who is being filled entirely” is cryptic. The word translated “fullness” can also mean “complete.” I liked the view that Paul means that the church is filled or completed by its head, Jesus, and Jesus in turn has the fullness of God the Father. The ideas of God the Father filling Jesus and of Jesus filling or completing the church seem odd, but they are mentioned in other places. (Eph. 4:10; Col. 1:19, 2:9.) With regard to Jesus, it emphasizes his shared divine nature with the other members of the trinity. With regard to the church, it emphasizes Jesus’s identification through the Holy Spirit with his followers. (See Acts 9:4.) In this context, it includes not only the essential characteristics of God, such as his moral excellence, but also power. The present tense of the participle indicates that this “filling” is active and ongoing.

To recap, Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians is that they would know God the Father more deeply so that they may better appreciate (1) the hope stemming for God the Father’s calling/election of the Ephesians; (2) the value of God the Father’s inheritance that is the church; and (3) the greatness of God the Father’s power, which He has demonstrated by resurrecting and honoring Jesus above anything else in creation, thereby giving the Ephesians and all other followers of Jesus an invincible champion as their leader.

**Application**

As we ponder the meaning of chapter 1, it is helpful to remember the context. Paul is in custody in Rome, awaiting a verdict from the Roman Emperor, and the Ephesians are anxiously awaiting news of Paul and probably wondering if the Roman government will start persecuting all followers of Jesus. Paul’s approach to chapter 1 thus reaffirms his intent to remain a loyal follower of Jesus, and Paul’s belief that the spiritual blessings Jesus provides now, and the material blessings Jesus will provide in the future when he exerts his authority over creation, are more important than the temporary threats and suffering the world inflicts on Jesus’s followers. Consequently, Paul does not display any panic nor does he expend energy asking for God to deliver Paul and the Ephesians from the threat of persecution. Instead, Paul’s hope and prayer is that the Ephesians would continue to grow in their appreciation of the spiritual blessings and benefits of a relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

This does not mean it is wrong to pray for deliverance or about other material needs. The Jerusalem believers fervently prayed for Peter’s release from prison. (Acts 12:5, 12.) Paul asked the Roman believers to pray for his own rescue from Jewish opponents in the hope that he would be able to continue his ministry. (Rom. 15:31-32.) But it is easy for our priorities to get flipped and to start focusing too much on worldly conditions and forget about the importance of our spiritual benefits. This is very dangerous because Jesus warned that our worldly circumstances may not be favorable. Focusing on those circumstances too much makes it easy to become despondent and fall away. Part of fulfilling the command to encourage one another is reminding each other of the incredible value of the spiritual blessings and benefits Jesus provides.