

We've all heard them. Stories about people who made bad decisions because they misjudged the future. People like Harry Warner from Warner Bros. Pictures, who rejected the idea of adding sound to their movies because in his opinion, "Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?" Or the Decca Recording Company, which refused to sign a recording contract with the Beatles because they thought guitar music was going out of fashion. These turned out to be really bad decisions because people miscalculated what was going to happen. Their false impression of the future meant they made foolish choices in the present. Maybe you've had a similar experience when you've tried to choose which lane to join in the supermarket checkout so as to get out of the supermarket in the quickest time. It's hard trying to see what the future will hold. Hindsight really is a wonderful thing!

God doesn't want his people to have to guess about the future - he is far too loving for that. Mind you, that's not to say that God promises to tell us everything about the future. But he does tell us some important and exciting things about the future. Indeed, it turns out that God's people can be very positive about the future, because God repeatedly states that a time is coming when everything will be perfect for us. No matter how bleak life may or may not seem at the moment, we can be confident that the best is yet to come. In the Bible this positive conviction about the future is called "hope", and it is an essential aspect of being a Christian. The essence of this hope is that we will live with God in a new, perfect creation, the new heavens and the new earth, and that our place in this everlasting perfect creation is booked and paid for - it is our inheritance - because Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, has made an everlasting perfect sacrifice to secure that inheritance for us.

Our hope of eternal life in a perfect new world obviously affects us in a very positive way. But it's not centred on us! It is important that we understand that. We are living in a society in which people are becoming more and more preoccupied with themselves. We are becoming more selfish. Researchers have analysed the words used in 1.5 million books published over the last 200 years. They have discovered that words like "get" and "self" have radically increased in use, while words like "give" and "obedience" have fallen drastically out of favour. It's reflective of society becoming more and more materialistic and self-absorbed. We need to see that our hope of eternal life in a perfect new world is actually completely centred on Jesus.

We see this as we look at Ephesians 1:3-14 which shows us what God is doing in the world and why he is doing it. In this passage Paul outlines for the Ephesian church (and us!) what God has done for them (and us!) in Christ. Majestic spiritual blessings are rolled out one after the other: chosen before the foundation of time, holy, blameless, predestined, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, lavished with wisdom and insight. But one particular thing is worth noting - namely the centrality of Christ. This is apparent in 3 main ways.

#### 1. Through Christ

At several points in Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul explains how we have been saved "through Christ". Verse 5 says God "predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ". The word "adoption" implies that we weren't always God's children, but because of Jesus something happened which grafted us into God's family. Paul explains that "something" in v.7: we have "redemption through his blood". "Redemption" is a word that originated in the slave markets of Paul's time. It meant to buy a slave's freedom. For example, someone could buy a slave and then subsequently give them their freedom. That's what redemption means - paying the price to set someone free. There is a member of the British House of Lords who does this sort of thing today. Baroness Caroline Cox is the founder of a human rights organization which has gone to the slave markets of Sudan to buy slaves in order to set them free. The organization claims to have bought the freedom of over 2,000 slaves. That's redemption. And it's what happened for us because of Jesus. He bought our freedom.

This raises a couple of important questions for us, doesn't it? Firstly, what do we need to be set free from? The answer is SIN - our failure to give God the honour, obedience and respect he deserves. This can be a hard truth for us to come to terms with because our natural tendency is to think we're not all that bad. We can usually find someone else who we think is worse than us and so we console ourselves with the thought that, "At least I'm not as bad as them!" Psychologists have a word for this - illusory superiority. It's the tendency in all of us to overestimate our positive qualities and underestimate our negative qualities.

Our false sense of superiority carries over into this amazing capacity to overestimate our own moral goodness compared to others. But the Bible bursts our illusory superiority thought bubble: "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:22b-23). "No difference." "All have sinned." Every single one of us has sinned, without exception. Later in Romans, Paul describes this as a slavery to sin (Romans 6:17). As much as we try, we can't break ourselves free from both the power and penalty of sin. Sin is what we desperately need redemption from.

The second question for us then is: what was the price of our redemption? What did it cost to set us free from sin? Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:7 that we have been redeemed through Jesus' blood - a reference to Jesus' crucifixion and the shedding of his blood on the cross. This is what bought our freedom. When Jesus died on the cross he was substituting himself for his people. He willingly received our punishment in our place in order to buy our freedom from the power and penalty of sin. So the cost of redemption could not have been higher - it was the sacrifice of God's one and only Son. The New Testament builds for us a massive picture of what Christ has done in order to redeem us and so secure our place in the coming new creation. Through Jesus' death we have been forgiven, redeemed, pardoned, set free and adopted into God's family. That's phenomenal. But there is more!

## 2. In Christ

The phrase "in Christ" is very significant in Ephesians 1:3-14 - it is used 8 times. And it is one of Paul's trademark ways of describing our relationship with Jesus Christ - he uses it over 70 times in his letters. It is not simply that we follow Christ or are saved by Christ or are redeemed through Christ or submit to Christ or even are inspired by Christ. We are in Christ. This phrase - in Christ - highlights the profound reality that Jesus not only died as our replacement but also as our representative. He doesn't just die for us. He died as us. Perhaps an illustration will help our understanding. Think of an athlete representing their country at the Olympic Games. Because they are competing on behalf of their country, if they win a medal, their whole country wins the medal too - their medal is added to the country's tally of medals.

This reflects what happens between Christ and us when we are "in him". Not only was Christ our replacement on the cross, he was also our representative. And, on account of this, God establishes such a deep union between Christ and his people that whatever happens to Christ is counted by God as happening to us. What is true of Jesus is now true of us. He died; we died. He is raised; we are (and will be) raised. He is vindicated; we are vindicated. He is glorified; we are glorified. He is loved; we are loved. All because we are "in Christ". As we start to understand this far-reaching connection that God creates at the cross between Christ and his people, our hope, our Christian hope, is all the more sure because "if we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection" (Romans 6:5). It is our union with Christ that secures our future hope in the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth.

## 3. United under Christ

There is still one more important thing to notice about the centrality of Christ to our hope. We see from verse 10 of Ephesians 1 that it is God's plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Christ. In other words, God's plan for the world is to place everything

under Christ's rule. The whole reason that a new creation is coming is so that Jesus might be glorified as the ruler of all things and so that people everywhere would be united in acknowledging and honouring him as Lord.

God's plan, his goal, to unite and deliver all things to Jesus is reflected in other parts of the Bible as well. For example, to the Philippian Christians Paul wrote concerning Jesus: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). Passages like these tell us that God's endgame is for Jesus Christ to be revered and worshipped. God the Father's highest purpose is to give Christ pre-eminence in everything. Just as human parents enjoy it when their children are deservedly praised by others, God the Father wants his Son to be honoured. That's the reason for the hope we have. We are looking forward to a new creation that is created for, ruled over by, and united under, Christ.

This truth demands a revolution in the way we think. Not just a slight readjustment to our thinking but a revolutionary change - a paradigm shift in which we change the set of assumptions through which we understand the world and life. Changing from Pepsi to Coca Cola is not a paradigm shift. Changing from a nomadic, agricultural society to an urban, industrial society is. Why? Because it requires a fundamental change in thinking and identity, which leads to a whole new way of life and behaviour. This is what needs to happen in order for us to fully come to terms with the centrality of Jesus Christ. Our thinking and behaviour is no longer about what I want to do - it's about what Jesus wants me to do. In everything - in my working, in my studying, in my family life, in my recreation, in my praying, in my serving, seeking always to honour and glorify him. We don't simply put Jesus at the top of our priority list. His priority list becomes our priority list.

This is what the apostle Paul was getting at when he wrote the passage we read from Philippians 3 - counting "everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things". It is what he was getting at when he wrote to the Colossian church: "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17). It is seriously ALL about Jesus.

The centrality of Jesus Christ shows us that our hope as Christians of a new creation is only possible because of what Jesus has achieved on the cross as both our replacement and our representative. We can also see that the entire reason for our hope is so that Christ might be glorified. Jesus Christ is therefore at the heart of both how we have hope and why we have hope. This may seem a bitter pill to have to swallow in our self-focused world, but it's not. It actually means that our future is all the more wonderful. Not only do we have a new, perfect creation promised by a powerful, good Creator to look forward to - and not only do we have an assured place within that new, perfect creation - but we also have a future eternal home that will be focused on and ruled over by King Jesus. We get an inkling of how gloriously good this news is from some of the names and descriptive titles given to Jesus throughout the Bible: the New or Second Adam, the Living One, the Righteous One, the First and the Last, the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, The Way, the Truth and the Life, the Word, the Rock, the Faithful Witness, Perfecter of Salvation, Lord of Lords, King of Kings, Prince of Peace. These titles are rich and varied and together they throw light on the excellence of living forever in a kingdom that is centred on and ruled over by a leader of this calibre. What an incredible blessing and privilege to be a citizen of God's Kingdom! There is no threat Jesus can't protect us from. There is no need Jesus can't supply. There is no wisdom Jesus can't give. There is no trouble Jesus can't remove. There is no good thing Jesus can't provide. It's no wonder that Jesus said: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and

you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

If those words from Jesus don't bring you comfort and assurance at the beginning of a new year, then nothing will. Amongst other things, they remind us that we have a hope of exquisite safety, serenity, beauty and rest in Jesus - precisely because it is all about Jesus, and not about us.

Amen

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