

series: Worth It: Listening to the Voice that Matters Most

Throughout this series, we have been exploring issues centered around our identity. We looked at the false identities that we tend to find our fulfillment in. We explored the base foundation of who we are as those created in the image of God. We looked at how our position as the children of Adam has brought about sin and brokenness into our world.

Last week, Mark preached an important sermon regarding the state of our current brokenness. He presented the biblical position that the problem which we face is a problem that is intrinsic to who we are currently. It is a problem that is internal and not external. We all have a propensity to brokenness, to perpetuate the brokenness of the world. Our natural bent is toward selfishness and brokenness within ourselves. And if we stop there, and build our identity on this brokenness, the whole of our life will be bent out of shape, pointed in the wrong direction.

It was Soren Kierkegaard who defined sin as "...building our identities and self-worth on anything other than God."

And this is not just sin such as arbitrarily breaking the rules, but it is also sin in the destructive manner. It is the misdirected life that would lead to the destruction of our own life. Because when we are talking about identity, we are talking about that which animates and organizes our life. And so, Kierkegaard is alluding to organizing your life around things other than God, for the sake of your own flourishing.

Mark's sermon ended last week on a hopeful note that even in light of our fallen, broken state, the offer of forgiveness is on the table. In Revelation, at the end of the story, those who are forgiven are able to enjoy eternal life with the Father by taking of the fruit of the tree of life.

I want to look back at this idea of the hope that Mark mentioned because it is from this concept of hope that we construct our true identity. It is a hope that is rooted in what God has done on our behalf, God's initiating, grace-filled, forgiving love.

In Ephesians 1:15, Paul, after a long, complex and beautiful section of text that we will look at in a minute, begins to pray for the church in Ephesus.

"For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you." Ephesians 1:15-18a

Notice that last line. Paul focuses on "the eyes of our hearts" being "enlightened in order that [we] may know the hope to which he has called

[us]" Don't they already know the hope? But here, Paul is not talking about the same kind of knowing. By using the phrase "eyes of the heart," he is speaking of a much greater depth of knowledge. Paul is saying, "I want the inward disposition of your heart, the thing that animates and organizes the whole of your life, to be consumed by the hope that you have in Christ." Paul is pushing beyond mere head knowledge and is praying that the church in Ephesus would be so consumed with the hope that we have in Christ that it would animate the whole of our identity construction and the way in which we live from this identity. It must be more than hope in your head; it must be a saturating hope that absorbs your entire life. This is how important hope is, particularly, how important it is to have a proper vision of hope. Because it is from this vision of hope that our whole life flows.

Now, we have to do a little work on this concept of hope, because the English word hope, which always translates from the Greek word for hope, has strayed some from Paul's intention, particularly the biblical conception of hope.

English Conception of Hope

Let me give you an example as to what I mean in how this has fallen short of the biblical conception of hope. If I were to say, "The Giants are going to make the playoffs this year." You would probably, and rightly respond, "Are you sure that's going to happen? A lot has to take place for this to be possible." Then I would probably say, "I don't know, but I really hope it happens" Now, latent in my use of the word hope is a kind of uncertainty. Am I certain? No, but I hope.

Biblical Concept of Hope

But this is the exact opposite of the biblical use of the term hope. So, every time you see this concept of hope in the English, you are imposing onto the text, the English connotation of uncertainty, which is simply not there in the biblical conception. Here is how one lexicon defines the Greek word hope.

Elpis - properly, expectation of what is sure (certain); hope.

Think of Hebrews 11:1 (NASB), "*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*"

As Tim Keller defines it,

"Biblical hope is life-shaping certainty about the future. Or put another way...living now, in a way that is completely changed by what you know will happen in the future. That's hope, being certain about the future."

We are fully and unavoidably hope-based creatures. We are controlled in the present by what we think will happen in the future. This may or may not be a conscious thing, but regardless; we are hope-based people.

As humans, we are drawn to all sorts of different narratives, or in the context of this series, different voices that are defining and constructing our identity. But what we believe as Christians is that we have the ultimate truth, the ultimate narrative about how the world works, about where the world is going, and what is our ultimate hope. Those without an understanding of ultimate hope are always freaked out by the things going on in the current moment because they don't understand hope.

When we find our identity, in this certain hope of being found in Christ, then there grows in us a certitude to following the way of Jesus in the present. It provides meaning and purpose to living in the present and working to bring justice and righteousness right here in the midst of this world. Because if there is no hope if our identity is merely rooted in the individual, in how one feels and desires, then life is utterly meaningless, other than the hedonistic pursuits of your own choosing. If our identity is built on a secular narrative of the present moment, then we have no foundation for life beyond. There is, therefore, no basis for justice, for right and wrong, for pursuing a better world here and now other than that which our humanist narrative communicates.

This brings an interesting and stark contrast to the average Bay Area-ite. Because the average Bay Area-ite has no vision for the ultimate future. They say, "I don't know if there's a god. As far as I know, when you die, that's it; I don't believe in an afterlife or whatever. But I believe in life. I believe in working for justice, that some things are wrong and other things are right."

Now, even if, in your head, you don't admit the absolute inconsistency in saying such a thing. Even if you intellectually refuse to see how completely inconsistent and silly it is to say that, the reality about what you believe about the ultimate future will penetrate you. It will infiltrate your life and your heart, and you will eventually grow weary and nihilistic about life. It will slowly creep through you, and you won't know why, but it is because you don't have hope.

To root one's identity solely on the prospect of humanist progress as the ultimate aim is to assume some sort of ultimate future. And once you get into the space of ultimate belief about the future, you are now dealing, not with sociological or philosophical realities, but you are dealing with the realities of religion and the divine.

Transition to Ephesians 1:1-14

Now, what does all of this have to do with our identity? I believe, what Paul is doing Ephesians 1:1-14, is declaring to the church in Ephesus, and all his future readers, that as Christians our hope, our identity is rooted in this concept of being found "in Christ."

Notice again what he said in his prayer, but this time notice the first words of the prayer.

"For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be

enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you..." v. 1:15

Paul begins by saying, "for this reason..." The prayer flows out of a greater discussion that points toward the root of our hope. It is 14 verses that beautifully and poignantly show what it means for the follower of Jesus to have an identity shaped by that reality. So with that, let's explore the reason for which Paul prays for the church and longs for us to have the eyes of their hearts enlightened to the hope that they have.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship[c] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. 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, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 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. Ephesians 1:1-14

A Few Notes about the text.

The section opens with a beautiful Jewish style poem, where Paul praises God for what he's done. Ephesians 1:3-14, in the original Greek, is actually one long sentence. It is a massive build-up; it is a statement from Paul about the entire schema in which God saves us. As you read this text, you can almost sense Paul's excitement bursting off the pages of this text. And the text is a fascinating work of writing. Scholars have long debated about how Paul is organizing his thoughts throughout this text. But what I want to focus on as we work through this text is the repetition of a particular phrase that Paul is clearly emphasizing and what I believe he is using to describe and demonstrate the basis of our identity and hope.

Nine times in this short section Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" or "in Him" as a reference for Christ. The prayer of Paul is that the eyes of our heart would be enlightened so we could see or understand what we find ourselves in, and that is finding ourselves "in Christ." It is clear this

is what Paul's focus is for his readers, that we would be fixed on our new identity, which is "in Christ."

Our Identity 'In Christ...'

We are made saints

"To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." vv. 1-2

Paul calls the recipients of the letter "saints" and "the faithful" in Christ Jesus. Paul uses this distinction because it is representative of our special relationship with God. This is a common designation of believers in the New Testament and was also used of God's people in the Old Testament. The term is different than the images that are conjured up for us now when we hear the word saint. Being a saint, in this sense, is not a matter of achievement. It is not for what we have accomplished, but it is the work of God in our lives. God is the one who has designated us saints. It is his work, not ours. Paul immediately follows up this designation with the phrasing "the faithful," because the two are intimately linked. Our standing as saints invokes in us a sense of faithfulness. To be designated a saint is to respond in faithfulness. It is a life that is shaped by this newfound relationship with God.

"In Christ" - and here we get the first "in Christ" statements of the passage. This is a familiar phrase throughout Paul's writings. It is indicative of an intimately close relationship between believers and the Lord. The theological term for this relationship is "incorporation," which implies that our lives are no longer our own but that we are incorporated into the life of Jesus. It is the vivid portrayal of the church as a body of which Christ is the head.

Having finished his introductory remarks, Paul launches into the letter beginning with praise,

"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." v. 3

The word blessed or "praise" here, is just that, a declaration of the goodness of God and what he has lavished on us. The phrase, "who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ," is intentionally repetitive, because it functions as an intensifier to God's work. We have received these spiritual blessings through the indwelling Holy Spirit. The clarification of spiritual blessing is to indicate the source of the blessing, that is the Holy Spirit. They are beyond the material blessings that at times we also receive, but are focused on that which will follow in Paul's opening marks, "forgiveness of sins, grace, etc."

We are beloved and adopted

"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves." vv. 4-6

Not only were we made saints, holy, and set apart amongst the creation, but we are also beloved and adopted by God. Paul now traces the

spiritual blessings he just spoke to their ultimate source in God's eternal purpose. Before the creation of the world, we have been selected "in Christ." The Greek verb chose is the usual word used to designate God's choice of Israel as his own people.

Before the foundations of the world were laid, God had determined that all who believed in his Son should be saved. That those who believe would be holy or set apart, and blameless in his sight. "In love..." signifies the loving nature of God's initiating work. All of this has been God's doing and is not in any way of our own doing. And all of this is flowing out of the character of God as "in love."

"...he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ..." God has acted with intentionality and purpose. The appearance of the word predestined doesn't indicate the controversies that would swirl around theological conversations in much later years. But rather, in this context, it describes the destiny of those who belong to Christ, "adoption to sonship." This term "adoption to sonship," is a legal term referring to the full legal standing of an adopted male heir in Roman culture. Adoption was a common practice in the Roman world and was a way to bring a desired person into one's family. The thrust of the text is of praise to God for the fact that he truly wanted us and, followed his own pleasure and will in bringing us into his family. We are not mere pawns in the scheme of life but are chosen and adopted sons and daughters into God's family. And all of this is an act of grace, a movement of God's "glorious grace."

We are redeemed

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding." vv. 7-8

What Paul begins here in verse seven, will detail God's grand narrative of salvation, moving from the individual and growing to the cosmic reunion of, "all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."

"In Him," we have redemption. Redemption is a term that emphasizes the idea of being emancipated, freed as slaves or prisoners. And here Paul has in mind the liberation from our enslavement to our own sin. Paul is continually emphasizing the depth of God's work for us. Unable to leave the topic of grace, Paul mentions it at the end of verse seven and alludes to it in verse eight. It isn't so much that God just gave us the riches of his grace, but that he also "lavished on us." And in doing so, it wasn't an act of foolishness, but lavished them on us with "all wisdom and understanding."

It is difficult for us to fully grasp the depth of grace that Jesus has lavished on us, mainly because it is difficult for us to fully grasp the depth of our brokenness. It is with extreme abundance that God has given us his grace. And all of this is but a small part of the greater plan of God's salvific work in creation.

"he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment

- to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." vv. 9-10

The plan moves now from our individual redemption to ultimately the redemption of "all things." God's gracious movement is greater and larger than we could imagine. In our redemption, we have been given knowledge of the grand movement of God, the "mystery of his will." This plan is not intended to remain a mystery to us. It is God working to reconcile and redeem all things. It refers to God's plan including Jews and Gentiles together into one body. It refers to the union of Christ and the church, and it refers to the gospel of Christ.

All of this is spoken in an anticipatory tone, "which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment." There is coming, some time out on the horizon, a day when this work will be completed. When our full redemption is brought about, when the world is set to rights, when all things in heaven and earth are brought back into alignment with God's intended form. This is the day that we long and wait for. It is the day that we have been redeemed for; it is the basis and foundation of our hope. Again, take a moment, and just consider the grandeur of God's plan. It is to bring to unity, "all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."

This is not a sort of domineering vision of Christ's dominance, but a vision of liberation and redemption of a creation broken and enslaved to something less than its designer's hopes. The words here literally mean...all things. Everything will be redeemed, the created order, humanity, everything. The aim of God's entire program of salvation is all things, every corner, every bit of the created order will one day find its culmination in Christ, liberated, redeemed, and called his own. This is our hope.

We are chosen

"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, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory." vv. 11-12

"In him, we have been chosen" Again, this is not the haphazard work of someone thinking on the fly, but is the ordered work of God. He is returning to the previous mention of predestined, meaning that before the foundation of the world was laid, God had chosen those who believe in him would be "for the praise of his glory." The phrase comes in two parts. First, the divine design - "predestined according to the plan of God." Second, the assurance - "who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."

As those chosen and given the "mystery of his will," we live in light of this reality. God is working in history, and we live in light of this. And our response to all that God is doing in this word is to "praise his glory" as

we are the first to place our hope in the unfolding salvation narrative of God, bringing together all thing in heaven and earth, so too we worship and are created for praise.

We are chosen by God, and all who believe are chosen to praise God in worship of that which he is bringing to pass.

We are sealed

"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." vv. 13-14

Our identity "in Christ" is because of hearing this true narrative, this true story. It is the message of the Gospel that brings our salvation. But this is not the only assurance we have, we have been "sealed" with the promised Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is involved in two ways to make our identity in him secured. First, the Holy Spirit is God's seal on us. This is a reference to the ancient practice of identifying and reserving an item, in particular, a scrolled letter, for its proper designee.

Meaning, a seal would be placed over the opening of a scrolled letter to mark and ensure the proper recipient would receive the letter. In the same way, the Holy Spirit is our seal, reserving ourselves as the assurance that we are found in Christ, because we belong to Christ, incorporated into him. Second, the Holy Spirit is our deposit. It is God's pledge that he will bring about this work to its completion. Our salvation as God's initiating work is assured by the work of the Holy Spirit. God will finish his work, and this is denoted by the sealing of the Holy Spirit.

It is our identity "in him" that is the foundational understanding of reality. To find ourselves in him is to allow this narrative to animate and organize the whole of our lives. This is the truth that our hearts are longing for; this is the hope that we are searching for; this is the true narrative that we must set our lives upon. Because it is through understanding our identity "in Christ" that we are able to fully know ourselves.

If we are to truly know ourselves, if we are to live from the truest thing about us, we must continually remind ourselves of our identity as those who are found "in him."

This is our narrative; this is our story. We are animated by these realities about our identity. We are made saints. We are beloved and adopted. We are redeemed. We are chosen. We are sealed. This is who we are.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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