

People of Purpose

Studies in Ephesians

by James Wood



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Introduction

The question haunts us; it's haunted humanity for as long as we can remember. Philosophers, scientists, poets, politicians, and everyone else have been seeking the answer to the burning question: What is the meaning of life? Deep within us all is the desire for meaning, for purpose. Wars are fought, songs are composed, and lives are spent seeking purpose; but the seeking never ends. Purpose always seems to be just out of reach.

The letter to the Ephesians shows the way, the path to meaning. God wants you to know that you are created and called in love with a purpose all your own. No one else can do what you can in this world; no one has been made with the calling you have. But purpose isn't the pursuit of an individual walking alone, and it's not something to be achieved once and for all. Purpose is found when a community journeys together, submits to each other, and finds unity outside themselves. Discover how God has made us "people of purpose."

About the Author

James Wood has served Churches of Christ in Washington, Oregon, Montana, Tennessee, and Hawaii. In addition to preaching and teaching, James has been, among other things, a barista, computer sales person, and an organic farmer in Ireland. He is married to his lovely wife, Andrea who is his cohort in adventure. They currently live in Vancouver, Washington. James has a Masters of Divinity from Harding University Graduate School of Religion.



Lesson 1 **Predestination for the Rest of Us** Ephesians 1:1-14

Key Verse:

He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will (Ephesians 1:5).

WARM UP



A year after we got married, my wife and I decided it was time to get a dog. We had wanted a dog for that whole year, and now we were finally living in an apartment that would allow it. I had heard about the local humane society hosting a pet adoption event down at the local pet-food store. So that Saturday we piled into the car to see if we could find a puppy to bring home.

Before I could turn the key in the ignition, my wife shouted, "WAIT!" and jumped out of the car. I couldn't see where she ran behind the car, but just a minute later she appeared with a tiny puppy. She'd found the stray sniffing around the dumpster in search of food. We took our fragile dog to the pet-food store anyway. She was so malnourished that we could see every bone and she was covered in fleas. We bought the supplies we would need to take care of the dog that found us and took her home.

At home we thought through a name for her. We quickly dismissed Rex, Fido, and Scrappy. And since I was just starting a graduate degree in Bible, my thoughts turned to theology. I did some flipping of pages in my Greek resources and found the word I was looking for - *pro'orizzo*. That seemed a little ostentatious for a dumpster-mutt, so we shortened it to Rizzo. That word means *predestined*.

WORK OUT



Often we think of predestination as if every event were planned out in advance, or as if we have a certain destiny to be fulfilled. The concept of predestination has caused countless arguments between Christians and it has been the grounds for people throughout history to doubt God's goodness. We can feel logically trapped, because if God predestined us, then He must know everything that we've ever done or ever will do. In some way that makes Him responsible for our sins. But worse than that, it makes Him responsible for Hitler and the Holocaust. How could a God who is good predestine *that*?

On the other hand, there's something very comforting in the concept that God is in complete control. The God who created the universe and molded the mountains is in charge of the course of my life. How can I be afraid when I know that God will provide? How can I worry when, as Jesus said, He takes care of the sparrow and the flower in the field (Matthew 6:30, Matthew 10:29-30)? The chaos of life makes me crave a God who is in control of it all and has predestined me for good.

Where does the Bible stand between these two extremes? Paul starts off the book of Ephesians with one long run-on sentence

(in the Greek) that goes from verse three all the way through to verse 14. In that one sentence Paul tells us that God chose us, predestined us (vs. 5), and purposed us (vs. 9), then he repeats it that God predestined us (vs. 11). He emphasizes the incredible work of God on our behalf through Jesus and continued through the Holy Spirit. God is the main actor, the focus of this passage. God's work, God's love, God's planning, God's sacrifice. He does all of this on our behalf, but God is the focus. This passage sets the tone for the first half of the book (chapters 1-3) where Paul explains what God has done for us and what that means for us as sons and daughters of God. We need to remember that the flow of thought here is from the identity and activity of God to how that impacts and affects us as His children.

Paul starts off by telling us what God has done for us in the "heavenly realms" by giving us "every spiritual blessing" (vs. 3). This statement is made in the context of a world where the heavenly realms were filled with spiritual forces that were opposed to people and threatened them on a daily basis.¹ So for us to have "every spiritual blessing" is for God to be in complete control of the chaos of the "heavenly realms." Paul goes on to tell us that Christ will unify both heaven and earth (vs. 10) which was unheard of. To the Greeks, heaven was a place of absolute perfection and earth was a place of absolute corruption; matter was bad and spirit was good. Paul tells them that God will unify and sanctify matter and spirit in Jesus.

Because God loved us, because He has called us to be adopted as His children, because of the sacrifice of Jesus, and because of the Holy Spirit; we are in the vanguard of this unification of heaven and earth.

1 *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vols. 5-9 Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 Compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 5:517.

See, the Greeks were right, in a way. This world has been corrupted and is broken, full of evil, and good does come to us from heaven. As Paul put it, “creation groans” under the curse of sin and death (Romans 8:22). We desperately desire for the harsh reality of a cursed world to be replaced with the spiritual blessings, the way of heaven.

Paul ends his run-on sentence with hope. The Holy Spirit is a seal, a deposit, and a guarantee of what is yet to come (vs. 14). For all the blessings we’ve received, for our adoption into God’s family, and God’s choosing of us, the unification of heaven and earth has not yet happened. Christ is not yet Lord of all, but He will be. Creation is not yet free from the curse of sin and death, but it will be. We are not yet “holy and blameless” (vs. 4), but we will be. We have a promise; we have the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit guarantees the promise of God, that we will one day be holy and blameless. The Greek word for “deposit” here is *arrabon* which originally meant “engagement ring.” By the time of Paul it meant any type of deposit that would guarantee an outcome. We don’t know for sure, but since Paul talks about the church as the bride of Christ later in Ephesians (5:23ff), it’s not too outlandish to think that he would start by reminding us that the church is betrothed to Jesus and the Holy Spirit Himself is the engagement ring.

The predestination we see in the first chapter of Ephesians is the predestination of love. God is saying to His church: “I knew you and I wanted you. I loved you and I chose you. I have called you and betrothed you.” That doesn’t sound like the predestination of a tyrant who is controlling his vassals, but the hope of a God who fills us with hope. It is the hope of a God who will redeem a fallen, broken world—who has already begun to redeem this world.

COOL DOWN



Predestination may not make perfect sense. There may still be tension between how much God knows and how much free will human beings have. But for Paul, in the letter to the Ephesians, predestination is all about hope. He's writing about the hope we have because of God's blessing, the hope we have because of Jesus' sacrifice, and the hope we have because of the gift of the Holy Spirit. I don't know if our dog finding us was predestined, but I do know that we offered her hope when she had none. God offers you hope.

Points to Ponder:

1. What conversations have you had about predestination in the past? Did your understanding of predestination create positive or negative feelings?
2. Is there a difference between individual predestination and the predestination of a community or group of people (such as the church)? How does that affect your understanding of predestination?
3. What place does free will have in a conversation about predestination? How do we reconcile our ability to choose with God's foreknowledge?
4. Think of the songs we sing about heaven. What message do those songs send about the relationship between the spiritual and the physical?
5. What do you think it means that Jesus will unite heaven and earth? How do you think the physical and the spiritual realms can be united?
6. What do you think about the Holy Spirit as an engagement ring? How does it make you feel to be betrothed to Jesus?