

**“IN IT TOGETHER – 2”**  
**“Signed, Sealed and Delivered”**  
*Ephesians 1:1-14*

If you were here last Sunday morning, you’ll be aware, I hope, that we have started to look into Paul’s *Letter to the Ephesians*, a letter from the Apostle to the congregation of fairly new believers who were meeting in the cosmopolitan seaport of Ephesus. The letter had been brought to the church by Paul’s colleague Tychicus, as Paul was currently in prison in Rome, and Tychicus was going to take the letter on to various other churches in the area. It is, like the rest of Paul’s letters, a letter in which the focus is very much on Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah of the Jewish people – the religious background of many of the congregation in Ephesus – but one of the main themes is to be the unity of God’s people. Paul begins the letter with a fairly standard greeting, but as the letter is to be taken round to various other churches, there is nothing specific to Ephesus – no names, no particular commendations or issues identified.

But after Paul’s opening greeting – which is standard in the style of the day and standard in the way he has adapted it to a specifically Christian opening – he starts to express his praise for God in vv3. And he gets a bit carried away. If ever you read a script for a play or a television programme, you’ll find it all makes wonderful sense. If you listen, for example, to Tony Blair or Barack Obama delivering a well-scripted speech, you have no problem with the sense of it (even if you have problems with the content of it!). But you try getting your head round a transcript of an off-the-cuff speech by someone like John Prescott or Donald Trump. It ends up all one long sentence, with little clauses and diversions here, there and everywhere. We have a family member who’s a bit like that, too – she must have evolved gills so that she doesn’t need to keep pausing for breath like the rest of us and can continue talking even whilst eating, like some kind of novelty ventriloquist. You have to concentrate very hard indeed to work out what’s being said. I’m sure you’re the same: you start a sentence, get carried away, and then can’t remember how you started it.

Well, vv3-14 here are all one long sentence. Now, some of you will quite rightly protest at this point that there was no punctuation anyway in the Greek of Paul’s day. But there were still some conventions of language which enabled people to make some sense of what’s going on. Paul has ridden roughshod over all that as his enthusiasm for God’s blessing takes over. It’s only later translators who have been able to make some sense of it all. It has been described by various commentators as “*a kaleidoscope*”, as “*a snowball tumbling down a hill, picking up volume as it descends*”, as “*a waterfall*”.

But what an outburst it is! I’m a bit of a pedant, as some of you know, and I get a bit fed up with some of the modern worship songs that aren’t written in proper English. And if you listen to a worship leader like Kevin Prosch or some of the Hillsong people, for example, you wonder what they’re on about a lot of the

time. But what they are writing and singing is a bit like this hymn of praise here. The wonder of God's person and activity just takes over and he cannot contain himself. God is just such an amazing and awesome being that language really can't do justice to him. (That's a theme some contemporary theologians have taken up and unfortunately gone off in quite the wrong direction.) But, fortunately for preachers of the orthodox school, it divides up neatly into three parts, each concerned with one of the persons of the Trinity and punctuated with the little phrase, "*to the praise of his glory*" (vv6,12,14).

And once we have found our way through these opening verses, we see that Paul sees the purposes of God in the life of the believer as something "signed, sealed and delivered". He is praising God for the blessings we experience as followers of Jesus – three specific blessings, in fact. And God has signed them, the Holy Spirit has sealed them, and Jesus Christ has delivered them. Let's take a closer look.

### 1. **THE FATHER HAS SIGNED IT** (vv3-6)

Usually, when you sign a contract or some other agreement, it's because you want something to happen. God has his purposes and he has shown that he really wants them to come to fruition. Reading through these words you'll notice just how often Paul uses words like "*chose ... predestined ... will ... purposed ...*" and so on. This is God saying what he wants to happen.

And this is no whim. When children get their pocket money, they decide they want to save up for something – a football shirt, say. But after a couple of weeks saving, they think a new set of Lego Technic might be better, so the money is put towards that. Then they see a book in a sale and decide that they've just about got enough for it now, so they get that instead. No doubt some adults have a similar approach to shopping. But God the Father doesn't change his mind like that when it's a question of the redemption of his creatures. When did he choose us? When we started to pull ourselves together? When we began to take his word seriously? When we recognised our own need? No – he chose us "*before the creation of the world.*" Depending on your views about creation, that may be a lot longer ago for some of you than for others! Whatever the case, this means that God has had his finger on your life since before you even had a life. Isn't that wonderful? God loves you so much because he has been waiting for you to turn to him since before the world was even formed. It's his will. He wanted it. You are very special indeed. If ever you find yourself starting to wonder whether you really are safe in God's hands, think about this. God chose you before the creation of the world. You are loved. You are wanted.

And what does Paul say that God particularly wants to happen? Well, in v4 we read that God wants us to be "*holy and blameless*". The disobedience of Adam and Eve, however you interpret that story in the

early chapters of *Genesis*, meant that God's perfect creation was soon spoiled. Having given human beings free choice, they then chose to go the wrong way and we became alienated from God and that holiness and innocence which we bore as part of his image in us disappeared, along with the fulfilment and satisfaction in life that God wanted us to have. God wants us to return to that original state, to be once again as he intended us to be. In particular, he wants us to be "*blameless*", to be liberated from the need to face up to the consequences of our wrong choices and wrong decisions. As we read in *2 Peter 3:9*, "*The Lord is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*"

And, as part of that, he wants us to be "*adopted as his sons*", he wants us to be redeemed. God wants us to be reconciled to him and to be as we were originally meant to be. The New Testament often uses this idea of becoming God's sons. There's quite a full treatment of it in *Galatians*, for example, where Paul says we are to grow up to receive the full rights of sons, no longer children nor slaves (*Galatians 4:1-7*). The point about the use of "*sons*" here is that, in Paul's day it was only the sons who came into these full rights automatically. Daughters were pretty well always excluded – so the miracle is that men **AND** women can have these rights of sonship, of being in the best possible relationship with God.

So this is, if you like, the **Will of the Father**, God wants this and he has put his name to it. He has signed it as a binding promise. He now has to deliver on that promise, to fulfil the contract he has signed.

## 2. **JESUS HAS DELIVERED IT** (vv7-12)

All this has been made possible through Jesus. He delivers it. God's will would have been an irrelevance if he hadn't put it into action somehow or other. Some of you here may be familiar with an organisation called Ofsted. They send groups of cheery and friendly inspectors into schools to make sure you're doing things properly despite the fact that the resources are getting tighter and the government's expectations are becoming ever more demanding. Once they have done their work, the school has to draw up an action plan based on their recommendations. That can cause a bit of hassle for senior staff and governors, but it's not necessarily a huge problem. The problem comes when you have to deliver the action plan. You've actually got to put it into practice.

We've just heard about God's action plan. He wants us to be holy and blameless. So how does the infinite, unknowable, omnipresent Creator and Sustainer of the universe actually get his will done here on earth amongst men and women? Well, Jesus is the one who had to deliver it. He had to shed his blood. He had to go and die. He was the only person who could bring to completion what God had planned. Read through these verses again and you'll see how often Paul writes "*in Christ*" or "*through Christ*".

He is the Redeemer. He is the head. He is the Source of our Hope. So that we could be assured that God the Father loves us and has plans for us, Jesus had to get involved. Without him, we are nothing. Without him, the plans never leave the drawing board. Without him, anything that we might attribute to the work of the Holy Spirit is just so much froth and bubble and empty words.

And what exactly is this **Work of the Son**? Firstly, as we've already mentioned, almost in passing, he was to **redeem us** (v7). In order that God's will that we should become blameless could be achieved, in order that we should be able to avoid having to deal with the eternal consequences of our sin, Jesus made the sacrifice that brought it all about. As his blood was spilled on the cross, he made it possible for us to know forgiveness, to experience the grace of God. And notice once again – as we have been saying so often recently – this isn't some grudging attempt to get things right again, this is God laying it on really thick. Paul writes that this is all *“the riches of God's grace which he lavished on us.”*

And the work of the Son was to help **reveal God to us** (v9). Jesus was able to make a seemingly remote God real and relevant. A God whom no-one had seen directly, who was separated from humanity because of the events of the Garden of Eden, became a human being and Jesus the Son, if you like, personified God. Jesus was God in human form and as he taught and healed and talked and interacted with men and women he showed something of what God was like and gave people the opportunity to discover *“the mystery”* of what God was like and what he was about.

But the main part of the work of the Son, which necessitated both redemption and revelation, was **to reconcile the world** to God (v10b), to bring everything together once again as God originally intended under one head, to restore a broken and fragmented world. In God's plan, in the will of the Father, there was no other way for this to happen other than through the death of Jesus. His coming into our world and his life, death and resurrection made that all possible. The **Will of the Father** was being accomplished by the **Work of the Son**.

### 3. **THE HOLY SPIRIT SEALS IT** (vv13,14)

And God hasn't just signed it as his will. He has put his unmistakable stamp on it. God promised his people the gift of the Holy Spirit, someone to dwell within us and help us in our lives day by day. This is the **Warranty of the Holy Spirit**. A warranty is a guarantee (it's actually lexically the same word), a deposit, a seal. The Holy Spirit is, if you like, the stamp of approval on those who have been redeemed and his is our receipt, ensuring that one day we can claim all that God has for us. A Christian is not a Christian without the Holy Spirit: we receive that seal of approval as soon as we commit ourselves to

God. He is promised to us by God and Jesus conveyed that promise to his followers in the conversation he had with them before his death. You'll find it in John's gospel from *chapter 14* onwards. The Holy Spirit is sent as a "*deposit guaranteeing our inheritance*". The Holy Spirit is the seal of God's promise. He has backed it up with something real.

Now, I believe that God's will is an objective truth. As we've said before, however you respond to it, it doesn't alter the fact that God wants all men and women to be saved and he has made that possible through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. The death and resurrection are historically verifiable events. But simply knowing an objective truth doesn't necessarily get us sorted out with God. After all, as James points out in his letter, the devil believes all that too, but it just scares him silly (that's a bit of a paraphrase – you can read the original in *James 2:19*). You need something experiential as well. That was one of the late, great Dr Martin Lloyd Jones' big themes – the experience of being a Christian, made real through the work (he actually called it "the sealing") of the Holy Spirit.

You see, John Wesley knew all the facts about God and he went about his work doing his best to follow God's commands. But it wasn't until he had that experience of his heart "*being strangely warmed within him*" at Aldersgate one Sunday evening that he really became alive. Listen – God loves you. He has loved you since before the beginning of time. You matter to him in ways that you cannot even begin to comprehend. That's the truth. As you begin to believe that, to accept it, to rest in it – despite what anyone else might say to you – you will sense the assuring presence of the Holy Spirit. God has promised that. And he will deliver on that promise.

So this is Paul's great reason for praise and for the outburst of *vv3-14*. When you stop and think about it, there's not much else you can do by way of response. I suppose the trouble is, we never do really stop and think about it – not in any depth, at any rate. Maybe we're just so used to it all, we take it all for granted. That would have been as much a temptation for the early Christians sitting in that little church in Ephesus when Tychicus arrived with Paul's letter. So Paul goes on to pray for them, which is what we'll look at when we next dip into this letter.

But remember this morning, this is the purpose of God. He wants all this to happen. It is his purpose for us. He has chosen us and sealed that through his Holy Spirit. He has gone to all the trouble of sending his Son, Jesus Christ, into our world to live and die and live again for us. This is **The Will of the Father**, delivered through **The Work of the Son** and provided with **the Warranty of the Holy Spirit**. It has all been "signed, sealed and delivered" by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

At the root of it all is the fact that you matter to God and he wants you to know that. And he wants you to respond, as well. Are you prepared to do that? To ask for his help in accepting his truth? To ask for the gift of his Holy Spirit to seal that in your life? Do you want to know Jesus better? To have a real hope for the eternal future? To appropriate the power of his resurrection? You can reach out and receive it this morning. Or if you want to explore it further, you can hear what else Paul has to say in this letter over the next few weeks and join a housegroup to mull it over with others. Or you can sign up for the new Alpha Course that is starting this Tuesday (have a word with me or with Doug Neil afterwards). Whatever else your response may be, please don't ignore it or you'll be passing up the most amazing opportunity to reconnect with the God who loves you and who wants you to get the very best out of this life and the next.

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**Questions to think about and discuss**

- 1) God "*chose us before the creation of the world*". What do you understand by that? Does that mean we have no choice ourselves whether to accept or reject God?
- 2) What does it mean to be "*holy and blameless*"? Do you think you are yet?
- 3) How does Jesus reveal God to us?
- 4) What does Paul mean by "*bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ*" (v10)? Does creation actually need redeeming? Why/why not?
- 5) "*A Christian is not a Christian without the Holy Spirit.*" Is that true? Why/why not?