

This Great Mystery

Session 1. Blessed in the Beloved

Before you had done anything at all, you were chosen, redeemed, and sealed: one blessing, in three movements, all of it in Christ.

What We Found

Paul opens his letter with one enormous sentence of blessing, verses 3 to 14, one of the longest sentences in the New Testament. We found its hidden structure ourselves: a refrain, 'to the praise of his glory,' closes three panels. In the first the Father chooses us before the foundation of the world and destines us in love to be his sons. In the second the Son gives us redemption through his blood. In the third the Holy Spirit seals us as the guarantee of our inheritance. The blessing has the shape of the Trinity, because that is the shape of what God actually did.

We counted the phrase 'in him,' 'in Christ,' 'in the Beloved' appearing again and again, ten times or more. Nothing God gives comes to us apart from his Son. We also heard something older underneath Paul's words: the vocabulary God used for Israel at Sinai, chosen, holy, loved, his own possession, now wrapped around a church of ordinary people in Asia Minor. What Israel was by covenant, we are in Christ.

And at verse 9 we met a word Paul is going to keep using: 'the mystery.' He told us God has made it known, that it was set forth in Christ, and that it is a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him. He did not tell us everything. Neither will we, yet. That is what the box below is for.

Voices of the Church

St. John Chrysostom, d. 407

Preaching on this very passage, St. John Chrysostom lingers over the phrase 'before the foundation of the world.' He teaches, in substance, that Paul heaps up words because grace has outrun language, and that God chose us before we existed precisely so that no one could imagine his love was a payment for our merits. God did not choose us because we were holy; he chose us so that we would become holy. Election is the beginning of our holiness, not a reward for it.

Homilies on Ephesians, Homily 1. Summary of St. John Chrysostom's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. If you quietly suspect God tolerates you rather than wants you: his wanting you predates the world, and predates every reason you could give him not to.

St. Thomas Aquinas, d. 1274

Commenting on this chapter, St. Thomas teaches, in substance, that predestination is entirely gratuitous: God's choice rests on nothing in us, foreseen or otherwise. But God's plan does not bypass our freedom; it includes it. He ordains not only the destination but the road, our free acts, our prayers, the graces that carry us. God's choosing does not crush the will; it is what makes the will's free yes possible at all.

Commentary on Ephesians, chapter 1. Summary of St. Thomas Aquinas' teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. Grace and freedom are not rivals fighting over the same territory.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, d. c. 202

Our Lord Jesus Christ did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is himself.

Against Heresies, Book 5, preface.

For the group. This is what it costs, and gives, for God to unite all things in Christ: he does not gather creation from a

distance. He enters it.

Live It This Week

Practices

1. Once a day, read Ephesians 1:3-14 aloud, slowly, as a prayer rather than a study text. Where Paul says 'us,' let it mean you.
2. Each evening write one line that begins 'Blessed be God who...' and finish it with something concrete from that day. Seven lines by next week: your own small *berakah*.
3. Before next session, write your one-sentence guess in the My Guess box below, fold this sheet closed, and bring it back. No one will read it until session 9, including you.

Scripture Memory

Ephesians 1:3

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."

Ephesians 1:3

My Guess

Seal this and do not look at it again until we open it

Paul keeps calling something 'the mystery' in this letter. In one sentence, what do you think the mystery is?

Go Further in the Catechism

- CCC 1077. the Father as source of every blessing
- CCC 257. destined in love to be adopted sons
- CCC 600. God's plan includes our free response
- CCC 698. the seal as symbol of the Spirit
- CCC 1296. confirmation and the Spirit's seal

Before next session. Read Ephesians 1:15-23 before we meet again.