

Anchored. Part Two. Chosen
Ephesians 1.3-14

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Most of us, I think, wake into each new day with a sense of being weighed down.

The new day opens up with fresh opportunity – people to be with, places to go, things to do – but joined to each of those is a burden of expectation that rests squarely upon *us*.

I think it could be summed up as "performance pressure." In each new setting, with each new responsibility, with each new person, with each new day, there is something expected of me, something I need to bring, in order to earn, and to keep, my place. We go through life like a muscle cramp – in one painful knot of unceasing effort.

The start of the fall football season – with preseason games culminating in Roster Cutdown Day, with all the underperforming players sent packing – reminds us of the tenuousness faced by every player and every coach with every single game.

They call it the *hot seat*. Job security is always in jeopardy, depending on my most recent performance. Did I accomplish enough, did I shine enough, did I outperform the others enough, was I successful enough, to keep my job, to keep my place on the team - at least until the next game, when the pressure to perform starts all over again?

We live in a performance-oriented world, and many of us come into each day weighed down by the burden to earn and to keep our place in it. We feel it at school, at work, in our sports, where performance pressure is built in.

But we also feel it in our relationships – with family members, with spouses, with parents, with friends. Did I do enough to get you to accept me? Love me? And how long will that last until I disappoint you or fail to meet your expectations and then have to scramble to come into your good graces again?

And for many of us, that carries over even into our ultimate relationship – our relationship with the God who created us. What happens to my relationship with God if I fail? *When* I fail?

What would it be like to come into each new day, and each new interaction, and each new responsibility, and especially in our relationship with God, with *freedom*? Released from the performance pressure? Out of the hot seat? Nothing at jeopardy? Not enslaved to having to earn and re-earn our place every time? Can you imagine?

We don't need to. That can be our *experience*.

This fall we've begun to study a short letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, in modern day Türkiye.

The very first sentence Paul writes in that letter, following his greetings, has the potential to set us free once and for all from a life of performance pressure. The very thing we want most, that we long for with our whole hearts, but didn't dare even think possible, is held out to us.

Walter Isaacson recently came out with a book called, *The Greatest Sentence Ever Written*. It's about the second sentence in the Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson, edited by John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, which says:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

That is a great sentence. But while it offers the right to life, freedom, and happiness, this one spells out the true source of it.

Are you ready? Here it is. The first sentence in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

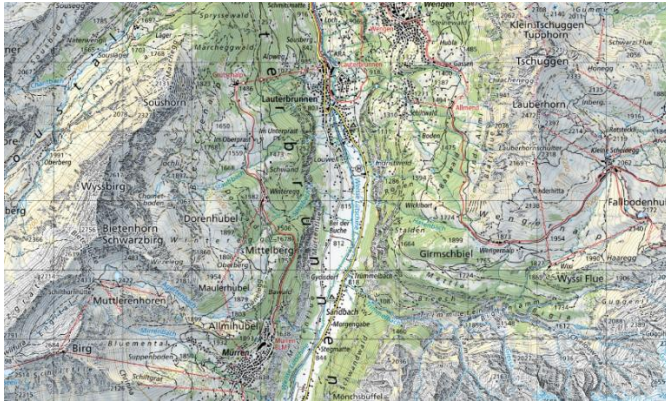
Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ, for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight, predestining us in love for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, 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, whom 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, making 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 whom 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, and you believed, at which point 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.

That's Ephesians 1.3-14, which, the way Paul wrote it in the Greek original, is *a single sentence* 202 words long.

Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that powerful? Isn't that . . . overwhelming? Where do we even begin? What are we to make of that?

I was talking to one of our college students last Sunday, who was getting ready to head over to Europe for a semester. I urged her to find a way to get to Switzerland and see the Lauterbrunnen Valley, which some people, with good reason I think, consider to be the most beautiful valley in the world. Among other things, it was the inspiration for Tolkien's Rivendell in *The Lord of the Rings*. He saw it as a nineteen-year-old and never forgot it.

Want to see what it looks like? I showed her a map.



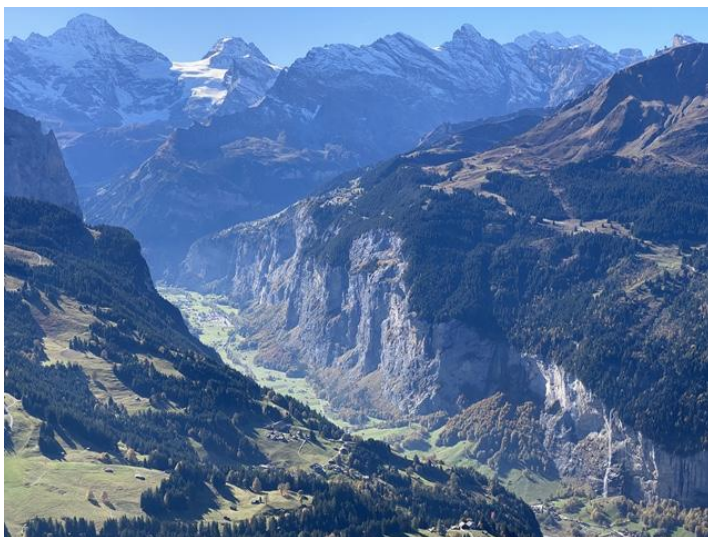
Check it out! Isn't that breathtakingly beautiful?! Wouldn't you love to go there?

Um . . . well . . . if I knew what I was looking at, maybe.

That's the two-dimensional topographical view, layered with contour lines, peppered with elevations, jammed with details, showing every building, pinpointing every peak, pass, ridge, and river.

It's really hard to tell what you're looking at. By highlighting everything it highlights nothing. A bit like Paul's first sentence in Ephesians.

What if I told you that, when you look at this map, this is what you were looking at? I showed her this picture . . .



Now . . . isn't *that* breathtakingly beautiful?! Wouldn't you love to go there?

A stunning, lush-green, valley, dotted with charming chalets, lined with gorgeous steep rock walls, with seventy two waterfalls, and overlooked by three majestic Alpine peaks, the Eiger, the Mönch, and the Jungfrau.

By pulling it up into a three dimensional relief map, we can see it instantly. Now that we know what we were looking at!

So what I want to do this morning – much to your *relief*, I hope – is give you the relief map version of Ephesians 1.3-14, raising up the most important features – one word, and two phrases – so they stand out and we can clearly see the beauty of what we're looking at – a breathtaking place God doesn't just invite us to visit, but a place he wants us to *live*.

The first word I want you to notice in this passage is the person who is central not only in this sentence but in this whole book.

God is mentioned or referenced in this single sentence as a name or as a pronoun 37 times.

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, predestining us in love 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, whom 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, making 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 whom 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, and you believed, at which point 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.

For example, in the open part of the sentence, in Ephesians 1.3, it says

Ephesians 1.3

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.

But even in this verse we are presented with one of the deepest mysteries of the Christian faith.

The Scriptures reveal that there is one God who exists eternally in three equal persons: God the Father, mentioned here in verse 3.

Ephesians 1.7-8

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.

God the Son, also mentioned in the opening line, and highlighted especially in verses 7-8.

And God the Holy Spirit, who is mentioned in verses 13 and 14, in the closing parts of this single cascading sentence,

Ephesians 1.13-14

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.

The New Testament never uses the word *trinity*. It was a word that was invented to try to capture this mystery it clearly reveals: that God is a person *and* God is a community. God is one, and at the same time God is three. God is a trinity, a Tri-unity.

That's an intellectual mystery – one that we will never solve. But it is also a mystery on a more personal level – one that will never stop taking our breath. Because what Father and Son and Spirit are collaborating together on is a plan that has *us* at its center.

The Triune God conspires to bring us into his redemptive purposes for humanity.

The Father *initiates*. He set out to bless us. He made a plan that includes us. He purposed to involve us in his holy designs for humanity for eternity.

Then the Son *carried out* the Father's plan. He executed the Father's redemptive purposes, which meant offering himself up for execution – a life given in exchange for a life. He incorporated us into his death, making us his own, and purchasing not just our forgiveness but our freedom.

And then the Spirit *applies* the Father's plan and the son's faithful execution of it. He carries the net of the Father's plan and the Son's sacrifice out around the globe and throughout history, and catches us in it, bringing its benefits home to those whom God chose before time began. He brings us alive to God, and he forms in us the likeness of the Son, fulfilling the Father's purposes.

The Triune God *conspires* – actively collaborates – to bring us into his love for us, to bring us near and to make us his.

Listen to this line, that comes just a few verses later in this book, summing up the purpose and the result of this divine conspiracy.

Ephesians 2.18

Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.

I remember, shortly after we moved here twenty nine years ago, Sharon suggested we go get ice cream at Silver Dipper. Sharon and our four little kids loaded into the car and we all went over. I thought the kids seemed unusually excited, but I didn't know why.

Not long after we walked in, I glanced around the shop and realized not only that every seat was taken, but that everybody was wearing dark glasses and reading a newspaper. Then all at once they all pulled their papers down, took their glasses off, and yelled, "Happy Birthday!" There were a bunch of my friends. Sharon and my kids and my friends had all conspired together in order not just to express their love for me, but to bring me into an unforgettable *experience* of that love.

That leads straight to the second key part of the topography of this sentence that I want to raise up.

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, predestining us in love 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, whom 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, making 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 whom 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, and you believed, at which point 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.

What Paul says next is incredible. Like the idea of the trinity, it too is something that is beyond our getting our head around, but it is sure something we can let penetrate our hearts.

Paul says God *chose* us. And he doesn't just say it once. He says the same thing a couple of different ways.

Ephesians 1.4-6

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.

First, Paul says he *chose* us before the creation of the world to be his.

The word *choose* is a Greek word that means "pick out from among." One of the things Sharon loves to say to our kids is, "Corrie, if all the Corries in the whole world were lined up side by side, I would choose you."

Think about what it means that God chose us *before the creation of the world*. That means, his choice of us was before we could possibly do anything to earn his approval or our place in his plan, or to disqualify ourselves from it. His choice of us came outside of anything we did to influence his choice, outside of any performance on our part.

Then Paul says he *predestined* us. This word joins two other Greek words. One is the word for "beforehand," or "ahead of time," and the other is the word "horizon." It means God decided way back there what was going to happen way up there.

Some of you are familiar with the idea of an *event horizon*. That's a term from the world of astrophysics. It refers to the tipping point surrounding a black hole when, if something reaches that point, it can no longer resist the gravitational pull and it gets drawn in. I think that's an intriguing parallel to the idea of predestination. God brings us to a place where his love becomes irresistible.

Now, if you've been a Christian for any period of time, you are likely to be a bit anxious about this word *predestine* and what it is and isn't saying, because, unfortunately, for at least 600 years, the Christian church has delighted to take this wonderful affirmation, that was meant to be a key ingredient in a wonderful feast of encouragement, and turned it into ammo for a six-century-long theological food fight.

So let me just pause here and make a few observations.

1. First, about Paul's purpose in using this word – and so many people miss this – the word's use in the New Testament has to guide us in the way we make sense of it, and this is what we have to see. This word *predestination* is only ever used in the New Testament to talk with Christians about Christians. It is never used to speak to nonChristians about nonChristians.

Sharon never walks up to any other children and says, "I wouldn't have chosen you." This is meant to be a word of deep encouragement to those who belong to God, not a statement related to those who don't.

I love the way Eugene Peterson captures that "I have eyes just for you" dimension of this phrase when he translates this:

Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ.

If we ever use the doctrine of predestination as anything other than a word of encouragement to those who are his, we are misusing it and misunderstanding it.

We all know what it is like to discover that, when choosing time came, our name was chosen. We were picked. They wanted us.



Think of what it feels like to get . . .

Picked for a team
 Invited to a birthday party
 Asked out on a date
 Invited over for dinner
 Offered a job
 Asked to get married
 Adopted by a family

That's the response Paul means to evoke by his choice of this word.

I've been enjoying rereading *Anne of Green Gables*, by Lucy Montgomery, a wonderful young adult book written over a century ago. In the story, there's a mix up at the orphanage, and they send a girl to an older brother and sister who were very specific in their request for a boy, because they were looking for someone to help them around the farm.

They plan to return her, and tell her so. But then they have a change of heart, and a day or two later, Marilla informs Anne that they have decided they will keep her.

"I'm crying," said Anne in a tone of bewilderment. "I can't think why. I'm glad as glad can be. Oh, *glad* doesn't seem the right word at all. I was glad when I saw that line of cherry trees and their gorgeous white blossoms – but this! Oh, it's something more than glad. I'm so happy. I'll try to be so good. It will be uphill work, I expect, for Mrs. Thomas often told me I was desperately wicked. However, I'll do my best. But can you tell me why I'm crying?"

That's what Paul means us to hear and respond to when he writes these words: God saying, "I am forming a family, and I am adopting you to be one of my sons or daughters. I chose you."

2. Second, about the concern that the doctrine of predestination seems to collide with human freedom, and to rob individuals of the ability and responsibility to choose for ourselves to become followers of Jesus, I just want to point out that at the end of this same sentence, which begins with Paul saying God chose *them*, Paul says they were included in Christ when *they* chose *him*.

Ephesians 1.13-14

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.

In Paul's mind, these two things are not mutually exclusive or contradictory at all. God was fully their choice . . . just as they were fully God's choice. That was certainly my experience.

When I became a follower of Christ as an atheist at Miami, during that whole multi-year process, there was no question it was *my* process. I wrestled, I resisted, I explored, I considered, and eventually I came to the place where I knew this is what I needed to do, and it was fully my choice, so I gave my life to Christ.

But looking back, I realized how the entire process was *God's* process. He surrounded me with Christians. He nudged people to ask me some hard questions. He awakened my heart. He put people on airplanes next to me to have meaningful conversations. He gave me experiences that pressed me to go home and rethink my life. Eventually I came to the place where I knew this is what I needed to do, and I didn't have any choice, so I surrendered to the one who claimed my life as his own.

Our efforts to tidy up the complexity of what the Bible teaches, by removing one or the other of two beliefs that seem to be in tension, will always result in teaching that is unfaithful to the Bible.

Think about this.

One way the church has sought to tidy up the problem of predestination is to take away the tension by saying God actually chooses no one. He only honors our choices for or against him. He simply looks into the future and sees which of us are going to choose him, and then he chooses them on the basis of what is known as *foreknowledge*. Which makes predestination mean nothing more than knowing the future, and it essentially takes anything meaningful out of the first half of this sentence.

The other way the church has sought to tidy up this doctrine is to say that *humanity* has no say in the matter. God determines ahead of time the destiny of us all. Some he chooses to become his, and to spend eternity with him, and others he rejects, choosing to send them to hell. And we really have nothing to do with it. God's election robs us of our choice. That belief is known as *double predestination*, and it's a belief that guts the meaning of the second half of this grand sentence.

I can't tell you how these things fit together without contradiction, but I can tell you that they do, because it is exactly what you and I have experienced.

God doesn't intend for us to solve the puzzle of how God could choose us at the same time he invites us to choose him. He just wants us to be knocked flat by it, moved to awe and gratitude. Just as Anne was. Tears of joy, not a tidy explanation, are the response God desires.

That brings us to the last phrase I want to lift up in this amazing cascading sentence.

In love

The phrase "In love." Those two words tell us what motivated God to choose us.

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, predestining us **in love** 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, whom 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, making 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 whom 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, and you believed, at which point 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.

God was under no obligation. He didn't need a few days to make up his mind, like Marilla did. God chose us without a moment's hesitation because he *loved* us!

Several words in this sentence tell us about that love:

Verse 4 tells us it was *agape* love, the New Testament Greek word that means costly, self-sacrificial love. This sort of love is not a feeling that comes and goes – it is a choice to seek the best for the other person even when it costs us.

And we already read earlier what that cost was.

Ephesians 1.7-8

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.

The cost of his own son's life! For us! In our place!

These two verses give us another important description of God's love. Paul says God's love was *gracious*.

This is a way of understanding our dealings with God that was exactly the opposite of how the Romans and Greeks thought of dealing with their gods. For a Roman or Greek, the "love" of a god was just a manipulated response when human beings offered the right sacrifice. When they did the right thing. And only as long as they continued to do the right thing.

God's love is not like that. Grace means a love that is given without its having been earned or deserved in any way. It is love that reflects something in *God* rather than being a reflection of something that is in us. It's a love that is independent of anything on our part in the way of performance.

And Paul says in this amazing sentence that that grace, that love that God has for us that isn't conditioned in any way on our getting it right, that grace is given to us *freely* in verse 6 and *lavishly* in verse 8. It is poured out on us without conditions and without limits.

Let me say that again. Unlike any other love we will ever experience, God's love for us is poured out on us without grace and without limits.

God chose us in love. Can you imagine being on the receiving end of that kind of love? We don't have to.

One of the themes that runs through Anne of Green Gables is that Anne's life as an orphan has been so difficult she has developed an incredible imagination for the things she will never actually experience. So when she finally comes face to face with genuine love, tears of gratitude spring up.

By God's grace, I have been given a gift that makes it just a bit easier to understand God's gracious choice of me.



As most of you know, my parents died in a plane crash when I was 20.

Three years later, after having moved to Cincinnati to work at Procter and Gamble in Brand Management, a couple from my church, Dick and Sibyl Towner, befriended me.

Then they invited me over for dinner. My big first impression the first time I came over was running over their ladder as I backed out of their drive at the end of the evening. If you know Dick, who is very conscientious about his tools, you know that's no small offense. But they acted as though it never happened.

Then, for reasons that are a mystery to me but not to them, they invited me to become part of their household. Then, in all but the formality of filling out the paperwork, they adopted me as one of their own, referring to me as one of their sons.

And the grace just keeps pouring out. When I married Sharon they adopted her as their daughter. Our kids are their grandkids, and our kids' kids their great grands, included in their hearts just as if they were their own.

A year before, I didn't know they existed. Then we met, and they kept choosing to open their hearts and lives to me at deeper and deeper levels, loving me, accepting me, welcoming me, delighting in me, receiving me as a flawed but loved child of God.

They have had dozens of different people live in their home over the years. But for some reason inexplicable to me, and through nothing that I brought to them, they invited me to live not just in their home but in their hearts, adopting me as one of their own. Their choice of me wasn't a rejection of everyone else. It was simply their choice of me. Not because of anything they were responding to in me. It was because of something that was in *them*.

That is what God's love is like. God chose us in love.

Unlike Marilla in *Anne of Green Gables*, God's love for us is the farthest thing from stingy, and it isn't conditioned on our getting it just right and our trying very hard to be good. It is simply a lavish gift freely given for no other reason than it brings God joy to give it.

Which brings us back to where we began this message. Our being chosen changes everything.

In a world where it feels like every interaction on every day requires our performance to earn and to keep the acceptance of the people around us, think what it would mean to know you were loved without condition. Think of the freedom you would experience.

we never again have to live in the hot seat, facing Cutdown Day, under slavery to performance, under constant pressure to get it right as a way of earning and preserving our place in the eyes of others.

When we are in relationships grounded in a love that is only a response to our getting it right, and continuing to get it right, then "I love you" means . . . I love you

when	as long as
if	unless
because	until

Paul wants us to understand – God wants us to understand – that his love isn't like that. God's love originates in God and then, freely given, lavishly poured out, it flows out toward us without limit and without condition.

John Eagen wrote a spiritual memoir that he called *A Traveler Toward the Dawn*. In it he chronicles his own journey from a Christian life based on trying to prove himself and trying to please others and trying to earn God's love, to a Christian life rooted in the deep knowledge of his belovedness apart from anything he might do or fail to do.

One time a spiritual director named Bob Leiweke said to him:

John, the heart of it is this: to make the Lord and his immense love for you constitutive of your personal worth. **Define yourself radically as one beloved by God.** God's love for you and his choice of you constitute your worth. Accept that, and let it become the most important thing in your life.

In God's love for us, and only in God's love for us, can a life of true freedom be found.

* * *

How do we respond this morning?

Paul doesn't leave us having to guess.

At the beginning of this long cascading sentence, he calls us to express praise to God – to God about what he has done, and to others about what God has done – for the many spiritual blessings he has poured out on us.

If we are already followers of Jesus, this is God's invitation for us: to pour out our praise on the one who has poured out his love and grace on us. Three times in this sentence Paul tells us that God's design is that glory would come to him – that is, that his glorious nature would be revealed – as a result of his redemptive plan for us in Christ. So, as Travis and Rob invited us this morning, let's let both private and corporate worship be the centerpieces of our lives as God's people.

And if we are not already followers, Paul gives us a clue to the fitting response for you in verses 13 and 14. To respond to God's invitation and be included in God's redemptive work by entrusting our lives to Jesus as the one who, in his great love for us, secures our true and lasting freedom. Tuen your life over to him as a response to his invitation. What is keeping you from giving your allegiance to Jesus as your King this morning?

Let's respond to God by giving him our worship and our lives.