

“God’s Sovereign Plan” | Ephesians 1:3-14
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(Discussion questions on page 9)

I was recently listening to an interview of a Christian author.¹ He’s seventy-three, has served God as a pastor, counselor and professor, and written close to fifty-books. I knew little about his upbringing and early career, and was moved by two stories he told about them—and what these stories said about God.

First, he grew up in a terribly troubled home. One summer when things were particularly rough, his parents sent the kids away to a camp for six weeks. He was nine at the time, his brother only six.

But God providentially placed him with a camp leader who studied the book of Romans with him. This changed his life. He recalls what happened late one night in his cabin, as God’s Word worked on his young heart:

I was up on the top bunk. I went to bed that night and was weeping. I lay there thinking, I need to just confess my sin to Jesus and plead for his forgiveness. And I thought, I can’t do this lying down. So everybody is asleep and I crawled down to the floor, knelt down on the floor in the middle of that cabin—a nine year old boy—and cried out for my savior’s forgiveness.

He adds,

To be rescued by grace before I made any of the major decisions of life, and while I was in this troubled home—was such a beautiful grace to me.... Fear of God, love of God, desire to please him, planted there at nine years old. I am so thankful for God’s rescue at such a young age.

He also shared about his first pastorate:

I was about three years into pastoral ministry. I was so beaten down and discouraged, criticized.... All I wanted to do was run...I went to my elders and said I want to resign.... There was a Sunday where they stood up with me and I announced my resignation. It was very emotional for the congregation.... As is the case in a small church, I was the last out of small building. I turned to lock the door and on the porch was the oldest man in the congregation. He said, “Paul can I talk to you?” He said, “You know Paul, we know that you are immature.” And then he said words that were just God’s grace to me: “Where’s the church gonna get mature pastors if immature pastors run. Don’t go. We

¹ “Everyday Gospel with Paul David Tripp,” on *Life and Books and Everything*, a Podcast hosted by Kevin DeYoung, Episode 158.

love you.” I immediately began to weep. And I walked home... and I came in weeping and [my wife] asked what’s wrong. I said, “God just nailed my shoes to the porch of that church.”....I stayed for many years after that.

He reflects,

One sentence of grace changed the entire trajectory of my life.... this wonderful ministry life wouldn’t have happened, no books would have been written, apart from that man speaking loving grace into my life at that moment....

I was listening to this interview while out on a long walk Thursday evening. And as Paul (Paul David Tripp) shared these stories, a wonderful and warm and securing feeling washed over me as I thought of many of you, as I thought about my own life. I was being reminded of this great biblical fact: God’s Sovereign Plan.

God has a plan. A plan that includes His people. He is working it out down to the minutest details of our lives. Mysterious as that plan’s unfolding can be, it is never ultimately threatened by sins or difficulties or Satan or principalities or powers—or broken families or hard jobs or seasons of discouragement.

As we read in Isaiah:

I am God, and there is none like me, ¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’ (Isa 46:9).

And in Psalms:

Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them (Ps 139:16).

The Bible does not expect us to understand how God’s plan is worked out despite a world filled with people making their own plans. How could we—we are mere mortals and He is God.

Instead, the Bible offers us an alternative to a world with no plan at all, spinning in space with no purpose. An alternative to lives that can only vie with fate and luck, or with the powers at work in the world. It offers us an alternative to a foundationless chaos: *the sovereign plan of God*.

In our series on Ephesians 1-3, we come to the densest passage in the letter, 1:3-14. It is a passage of praise, where Paul praises God for the blessings we have in Christ. But rather than merely highlighting these blessings, he situates them within the sovereign plan of God, and shows their ultimate purpose as praise of God’s glory and grace. We will spend three sermons in this passage—today, **God’s Plan**, next, **God’s Blessings**, and third, **God’s Glory**.

In focusing today on God's Sovereign Plan, we are curious about what this plan entails, but also why Paul wants his readers to be aware of it. What is the practical payoff to seeing that God's plans lie beneath and within and before all you do?

Ephesians 1:3-14 is one long sentence in Greek, some 200 words. Notice the phrases that surface this theme about God's sovereign plan:

God "chose us before the foundation of the world" (1:4); "according to the purpose of his will" (1:5); "making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose" (1:9); "a plan for the fullness of time" (1:10); "according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will" (1:11).

There are seven truths about the sovereign plan of God that I want to highlight here, asking along the way how they impact Paul's readers.

1. First, God's Plan Is Paramount

By paramount I mean both that it is first—prior to all other plans or designs. And that it is ultimate—every other plan will finally be seen as subservient to God's plan.

That it is first is evident when Paul writes that God chose us "before the foundation of the world" (1:4). That it is ultimate is evident when Paul says that God's plan is "a plan for the fullness of time, to unite [or, sum up] all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (1:10).

Both *before* time began, and in the *fullness* of time, God's plan is paramount. Before the events of the first sentence of the Bible—"in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1)—God already had a plan that involved "all things in heaven and on earth" (1:10).

Sometimes a developer or builder will be tasked with developing an entire city block. During the development of that block, dozens of other contractors and projects and plans will be at work. But all these are subservient to the main builder's overarching blueprint—that plan is first, foremost, paramount.

In terms of what is *truly* unfolding in the world, the plans of nations, cities, leaders, families, individuals are all secondary and will be seen, ultimately, as subservient to the plan God made before the foundation of the world.

2. Second, God's Plan Is Purposeful

In the 19th century Friedrich Nietzsche announced the death of God. Also in the 19th century, Charles Darwin set in motion the death of nature (when we chip away at belief in an intelligent creator, we simultaneously relegate nature to a random accident, with no inherent meaning). These two deaths lead to the death of purpose. If there is no God, if the world is accidental and random, it's impossible to answer the questions, What is our purpose? What is everything for?

This is not the world of the bible. Three times the word “purpose” is used by Paul in relation to God’s plan and God’s will:

God “predestined us for adoption according to the **purpose** of his will” (1:5); He makes known to us the mystery of his will “according to his **purpose**” (1:9); We obtain an inheritance, “having been predestined according to the **purpose** of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (1:11).

The word “purpose” (εὐδοκία) in these verses literally means “good thought.” It carries not only the sense of intention, but also desire. God’s plan is his purpose for all things, and issues from what makes God happy. That purpose includes not only creating the world and people, but as our passage shows, choosing a people for himself, redeeming them, sanctifying them, and bringing them into an inheritance with him. And the ultimate purpose of the plan is summed up in verse 10, “to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth,” and all this to the “praise of his grace and glory” (1:6, 12, 14).

Everything that exists—the universe, our planet, the church in first-century Ephesus, the church in twenty-first-century northern Virginia—has come about according to the purpose and pleasure of God. Nothing is random. Nothing is purposeless.

3. Third, God’s Plan Is Revealed and Hidden

The word “mystery” appears six times in Ephesians, often referring to a part of God’s plan that was unknowable until he chose to reveal it. Paul says in verse 9,

God made known to us the mystery of his will (1:9).

That mystery is that God was all along planning to sum up the religion of Israel in Jesus, and share the blessings given to Abraham’s people with the whole world, through Jesus.

But notice what this implies. The key to God’s plan was not something people could reason their way to. In fact, Paul says later in this letter that this information

was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets (Eph 3:4-5). And Paul describes his calling as, “bringing to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God” (3:9).

While God reveals aspects of his plans, he “hides” others. And we cannot discover his plans with our own intelligence—“as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways [says God] higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:9). Once Jesus’ apostles asked to know when the end of history would come, and Jesus answered, “it is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:6). There are things that “even angels long to look into” (see 1 Peter 1:11-12), that remains the secret counsel of God.

An important lesson lies here: we often assume we *should* know what God is up to, or that we have a *right* to know. But God has not chosen to lead us by revealing every detail of his plan to us. He has told us much—His will is for our moral conduct; that salvation comes through Jesus alone; and more. But day by day, we often aren't sure why things are unfolding as they are. And while sometimes God may show us specifics, more often than not we must “live faith not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7).

We are sheep, not the shepherd. Sometimes all we know is that we are supposed to stay close to our Shepherd, and trust He knows where He is leading us. And we should be slow to announce that we know exactly what God is doing when we see events unfold.

E.g., Paul might have thought his incarcerations and pending trial before Caesar was thwarting God's plans—when in fact, these circumstances were the very things that took Paul *to Rome*, which is what he wanted all along.

God's plan is paramount, purposeful, and sometimes revealed and sometimes hidden.

4. Fourth, God's Plan Is Christ-Centered

E.g., If this passage were a **Christmas stocking**, Christ would not be one of the gifts inside; he would be the stocking itself.²

From verses 3-14, Jesus is referenced at least thirteen times. Christians are chosen “in him” (1:4), adopted as children of God “through him” (1:5), blessed “in the Beloved [who is Christ]” (1:6); Christians have redemption “in him,” are cleansed by “his blood” (1:7) and God is uniting all things “in him” (1:10).

We will dive into the blessings we have “in Christ” in our next sermon. Here we note that while God pours out common grace upon everything he has made—“he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt 5:45)—, in God's ultimate plan, there are no spiritual, lasting blessings outside of Christ. And the ultimate point, meaning, and hope of all things, is found in their relation to Christ.

So, in the plans we make for our own lives, we would be foolish not to ask how they are pointing to life with Christ. If you are living a life that requires pushing Jesus out, or denying His Lordship, you can be sure this is not God's ultimate plan for you.³

5. Fifth, God's Plan is All-Encompassing

In verses 10-11, Paul uses the phrase “all things” twice:

² I get this analogy from Sam Allberry, *One with My Lord* (Crossway, 2024).

³ Remember that ultimately, according to God's sovereign plan, “every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord” (Phil 2:10-11).

In verse 10, God's plan for the fullness of time is to "unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and on earth."

Then in verse 11, Paul tells us God "works all things according to the counsel of his will."

You may wonder if the details of your life are outside the scope of God's plan. They are not. God is at work in the conversations you will have today and tomorrow, at work in the family he has placed you in, at work in sorrows, joys, disappointments and seeming dead-ends.

God's work penetrates to the movements of **hearts**: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Prov 21:1).

And God's work involves the external **circumstances** that impact the success of the plans our hearts make: "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps" (Prov 16:9).

Remember Jonah? What an example of the all-encompassing nature of God's plan and how it is worked out. "In the story of Jonah, everyone and everything obeys God's will and plan (except Jonah): the storm, the dice, the sailors, the great fish, the Ninevites, the east wind, the gourd, and the worm." Each part of creation is capable of fulfilling God's purposes for it—whether animate or inanimate. And each obeys in a different way.⁴ And God uses all these circumstances to redirect Jonah—despite Jonah—according to God's plan.

Seeing with the eyes of faith, our world is a theater where God is at work everywhere, in everything.⁵

6. Sixth, God's Plan is Unthwartable

It cannot be stopped—not by human rebellion; not by demonic opposition. The apex example of this is Jesus's crucifixion, when the wills of men and Satan act seem to topple God's plan. Yet we read in Acts:

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death...(Acts 2:22-24).

The hands of lawless men did a lawless thing and somehow it unfolded "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." In fact, to show how planned this moment was, God foretold it a thousand years earlier in Psalm 22, down to the method of execution and the detail

⁴ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 399.

⁵ We may be perplexed or even offended to learn that God is working *all things* toward His purposes. But the alternative to this are lives cast upon blind fate, chance, or luck. Or the naivety of believing that despite the billions of forces at work around and within us—from nation states to our inherited genes—we are entirely free to plan and chart our destiny.

of soldiers bartering for Jesus' clothes: "they have pierced my hands and feet" (Ps 22:16); "they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (Ps 22:18; Jn 19:24).

None of this is to say that God is the author of evil, or that evil pleases him. Rather, it is meant to comfort those of us living in a world beset by evil, whose lives at times become overpowered by evil or sin. Paul underscores the powerful hand of God throughout Ephesians, that it is at work despite all odds:

God is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think according to the power at work within us (Eph 3:20).

Therefore, man's willing and doing are not ultimately decisive in what comes about in your life or in what comes to pass in the world. God is.

Seventh, God's Plan is Good

Motivated by love:

In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will (1:4-5).

Saturated with grace:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,⁸ which he lavished upon us (1:7-8).

Paul is not naive. He knows that the life of faith in this present world is no guarantee for ease or success. Paul is personally aware that things can happen to us in this life that makes it almost impossible, emotionally, to feel that God's will for us is good. But Paul has Jesus Christ in mind when he ponders what God has up to. And in the pierced hands of Jesus Christ, Paul has a window onto the heart of the God who is at work.

Paul knows (as he's written), that "for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). He reasons, He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom 8:31-32).

And therefore, it is the sovereign plan of God—the paramount, purposeful, revealed-and-hidden, Christ-centered, unthwartable and good plan—that becomes the rock under Paul's life.

As I listened to this man's interview, this seventy-three-year-old man, and as he looked back over his life, I thought of so many of you. The dear members of our church family. You have heard the call of God in Christ. You walk by faith. And your lives have so many unexpected turns, ups and downs, joyful times and sorrowful times. My prayer for you—for us—is that through the Word of God, set forth here in Ephesians 1, we would feel the warmth, the solidity, the comfort, of the sovereign plan of God—upholding us, guiding us, embracing us. This "plan for

This is a preaching draft.

the fulness of time, to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10).

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Small Group Questions for God's Sovereign Plan, Ephesians 1:3-14

1. According to Ephesians 1:3-14, does Paul believe events unfold outside of God's control, or under God's control?
2. In verse 11 of the passage, Paul speaks of "him who works all things according to the counsel of his will," referring to God's power to work out his plan. Do you think Paul always found the events of his life easy to interpret as God at work? What might we learn from Paul, who though he suffered greatly, cultivated a faith that believed God was "at work in *all things*?"
3. In verse 9, Paul speaks of God "making known to us the mystery of his will." Paul is referring to the revelation we now have that Jesus Christ is at the center of God's plan. Reflect on this for a moment—that God's will is often something we cannot know unless he reveals it. Why might God not tell us every detail of his will and plan? What type of spiritual growth might this awareness cultivate in us?
4. There is a tension in Scripture where Christians, on the one hand, pray, "Thy will be done" (Matt 6:10), surrendering our own will to God's will. While on the other hand, we are encouraged to make our request known to God, to ask, seek, and knock (Matt 7:7), implying that God wants us to make our desires known to him. In your own life, how have you practiced both surrendering your will (your plans) to God's will (His plans), while being honest with him about your immediate desires and needs?
5. Ephesians 1:3-14 is a passage extolling the blessings Christians have in Christ—election (1:4), redemption (1:7), assurance (1:13-14). Why do you think Paul weaves through such a passage the theme of God's sovereign will? How might weaving this theme into thoughts about your own life impact you?
6. The question of how God's sovereign plan and will interact with our own plans and wills has perplexed people for centuries. But should we be so surprised—we mere mortals—that we cannot perfectly understand God's ways? Rather than allow these mysterious to push us away from God, we can allow them to draw us up to worship him, whose ways are as beyond our grasping as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isaiah 55:9).