

Sermon File # 865

Scripture Text: Ephesians 1:1-14

Sermon Title: *We Are Significant Because...*

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We Are Significant Because...

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, as we begin a new sermon series from this great exposition of what has been called "The Switzerland of the New Testament" (Simpson, 17), which should make the Swiss among us proud! The apostle wrote this letter perhaps around AD 60-62 from prison in Rome, and because of the lack of personal references, some scholars assume Paul intended this communication to be circulated among churches in the surrounding cities of Asia Minor (Mohrlang, 1994ff). A pattern we can see also in his letter to the Romans, the first half of Ephesians (Chapters 1-3) is doctrinally foundational and the second half (Chapters 4-6) is ethically practical, in what is called the indicative-imperative pattern.

I'm looking forward to journeying with you through this amazingly concise yet profoundly meaningful and practical letter because of what it will tell us about the riches that are ours in Christ Jesus. Paul writes to encourage believers experiencing difficulties and facing persecution about the new level of living that is ours in the kingdom of God. Because of God's gracious provision in Christ, we belong to what John Stott calls "God's New Society," wherein we have a life-changing relationship with God and with one another in his kingdom (Stott, 24ff). My prayer for us in 2010 is that we might discover more of our spiritual riches in Christ that will enrich our walk with God and our relationships with one another, at home, in church, the workplace and in the communities where God has placed us.

The first two verses are Paul's typical greeting, and then he begins a paean of praise in verses 3-14, which amazingly is one sentence in the Greek. (Thankfully,

translators have simplified things for us in breaking this long sentence down to manageable, smaller-sized sentences.)

Follow as I read **Ephesians 1:1-14**.

Some years ago, when I was experiencing a crisis in ministry leadership, someone suggested I read a book titled *Half Time: Changing Your Game Plan from Success to Significance* (Buford). The pastor's wife who recommended this book must have detected that I was experiencing a sense of failure, with the resultant loss of self-esteem that was leading me to the brink of depression. The title of the book, *Half Time*, is the image of a football (American or European) team's gathering between halves of a contest to refresh, regroup and perhaps revise their game plan before the second half of the contest. This book was helpful in the way it called me to reassess my life's calling and purpose, which cannot be nullified by failure to reach certain goals, and to move on with a new sense of God's calling to a life of indestructible significance in Christ.

As we begin the Year 2010, it's good for us to take a "half-time" break to reassess our life's game plan, and to evaluate if we are playing the game for success in the eyes of the world or significance in the eyes of the heavenly Father. If we are intent on success, we run the risk of heartbreaking disappointment and failure and an empty sense of personal worthlessness and insignificance. Although the world offers a great variety of self-help books and therapies about raising our self-esteem through achieving success, most of us, sooner or later, find ourselves feeling inadequate. We can easily become overwhelmed by a gnawing sense that we are not living up to our potential or even to a socially acceptable standard of achievement. Maybe even already you have failed to live up to your New Year's resolutions, and you have accepted the fact that 2010 will be no better than 2009.

I invite you to join me today in looking at this great outpouring of praise from the Apostle Paul, who outlines his inspired thoughts with the three persons of the Trinity. In verses 1-6, he praises God the Father; in verses 7-12, the Son, and in the final two verses, 13-14, Paul praises the Holy Spirit. In essence, Paul is saying that our significance does not come through our self-aggrandizement or positive thinking about ourselves. Rather, our sense of significance comes from the Triune God and what Paul says the Father, Son and Holy Spirit thinks about us. Regardless of your station in life, your present circumstances and what you think about yourself as a success or failure, what matters is what God our Maker, Jesus our Savior and the Spirit our Helper thinks about us.

First let's note that we are significant (having meaning and importance) because...

We were chosen by God the Father (verses 1-6)

Because of some misunderstandings and controversy-spawned division over the doctrine of God's foreknowledge, election and predestination of his chosen people, simply hearing these words, such as in our Scripture passage, causes a negative reaction among some. What we need to focus on is the word "love" in verse 4. Paul "emphasizes the loving nature of predestination" (Wood, 24). Paul doesn't speak of predestination as a prerequisite for conversion. Nowhere do the Bible's evangelists and apostles preach God's election to the unconverted. Rather, it is a thanksgiving doctrine that praises God for his sovereign and gracious choice of us when we were

not seeking God, but rather were running from him. As one scholar says, it's very comforting to know that God has chosen us out of the entire human race, and "the real problem is not why he has not chosen some, but why he chose any" (Hoehner, 175f).

And we were chosen by God the Father...

Before the creation of the world

In eternity past, God knew us and chose us for himself. That's an amazing thought, that we were in the mind and heart of God before he called creation into existence. This means that he created the universe for us to enjoy and as a place for our communion with him and others. Whether you are a young or old earth creationist, it's in any case mind-boggling to think that you and I were in his mind before he said "Let there be..." (Genesis 1:3).

You and I were not an afterthought with God the Father. In his heart he was our "Abba," our "dear heavenly Father (Matthew 6:9) before the worlds began. God chose us even with his foreknowledge of our sinful rebellion, and he made provision for us to be forgiven, reconciled with and restored to his love. When the Father sent his Son to die for us he had you and me in mind, providing for our forgiveness and the free gift of eternal life. As Peter says, Christ as our perfect sacrifice and Savior from sin was also "chosen before the creation of the world" (1 Peter 1:20).

We are significant because we lost and needy sinners were chosen by God the Father before the creation of the world to be saved through his Son, whose incarnate life and sacrificial death were also in his mind and heart before the worlds were made.

And you and I were chosen...

To become God's adopted children

Our text tells us that "In love (God the Father) predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will" (4b-5). A more gender-equal, dynamic equivalency translation reads "God decided in advance to adopt us into his family" (*NLT*). We are all included, male and female, as God's adopted children, but some of the symbolic significance of adoption is gender specific to adopted males in the 1st Century Roman world.

Being a Roman citizen, Paul could appreciate this imagery of God's adopting us as his sons. A man's slave could become his adopted son, who would have privileges even above a younger natural born son. The adopted son who had been ransomed from slavery would be released from the bondage of his former owner. Paul is saying that God chose us, bought us from our former slave owner, the devil, and now takes full responsibility for us, including our discipline, which is by his love and for our good, as we read in Hebrews 12:5-11 (Hoehner, 194-197).

As God's adopted children, we have been released from bondage to sin and made children and saints of God, as we read in the 1st verse in Paul's greeting and address. Again, the dynamic equivalency translation reads "God's holy people" (*NLT*). A saint is one who has been separated from the rest of humankind and set apart for God's purposes, just as the furnishings of the temple were made holy for

use in worship and sacrifice. But long ago in the history of the church, “saint” became a designation for someone who has been canonized by the hierarchy of certain denominations of Christian churches.

This past year, Father Damien, the 19th Century (1840-1889) priest who gave his life in evangelizing and serving the lepers of Molokai, Hawaii, was canonized as Belgium’s first saint. As much as I admire the life and devotion of Heilige Damiaan, i.e. Jozef De Veuster of Tremelo, Belgium, I disagree that one has to be canonized by the Pope and his College of Cardinals as an exceptional servant of the church or even a worker of miracles in order to be a saint. In fact, to be a saint in this tradition, one has to be dead first! But a saint, according to the apostle, is one who has been made truly alive, saved by grace and adopted as his child and called to follow Jesus as Lord. To be God’s saint, you don’t need to perform a miracle—you need a miracle performed on you! So, you and I are saints in this biblical sense, and are challenged to live up to this high calling, this heavenward calling (Philippians 3:14).

So, let’s add this to our resume’ of significance—we’re a saint as well as an eternally chosen, adopted child of God. And we are significant because...

We were purchased through God the Son (verses 7-12)

I recall a short shopping excursion with a businessman in the USA, who was a guest musician in our church for the week. We marveled at the price of a particular item in a gift shop, which seemed perfectly useless and unattractive to us. And my friend noted that, regardless of how intrinsically worthless an item may appear, it is actually worth what someone will pay for it. I was reminded of his remark when I viewed some modern so-called art in a museum of contemporary art in Cologne week before last. What appeared to be random strokes of paint on a canvas, much like our 22-month grandson would make, is enshrined in a prestigious museum as a valuable work of art. Museums and wealthy individuals will pay exorbitant amounts of money for what I, with my lack of appreciation and artistic sophistication, think is worthless art. My opinion doesn’t matter. What the art critics and museum curators think and are willing to pay establishes the worth of a piece of art.

And what God was willing to pay for us, when we had no apparent worth or deserving within ourselves, is the real indication of our worth to him. We are significant because we were purchased through God the Son...

Who redeemed us through his blood

Paul uses the imagery of our being enslaved by sin and under the condemnation of death; and God, through sending his Son to die for us, paid the price for our release, forgiveness and everlasting relationship of peace with him (7). The Apostle Peter also underscores the price of our redemption when he writes:

“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:18f).

Through God the Son the supreme ransom price was paid for us when we were hijacked and kidnapped, as by Somali pirates. Jesus said that he had come in order

to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45; Matthew 20:28; 1 Timothy 2:6; Hebrews 9:15). Just as those released from a lengthy, tortuous kidnapping are overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude and relief, so we should be grateful that God places such a high value upon us that he would pay such a high price for us in order that we might be his children and with him in glory forever.

Just this past week I received an email from a young lady whom I had quoted in a sermon that appeared on our website after her release from her captors in a country that is hostile to the Christian message. She asked that I remove her name because she plans to return to a hostile, difficult country, perhaps this very one where she had been held captive, with the message of Christ! This is a follower of Jesus who understands her debt to God's redemption price for her.

Paul says that Jesus has redeemed us, and also we are significant to him...

Who lavishes his grace upon us

Our text tells us that God through Christ has "freely given" us his glorious grace (6) and has "lavished" his grace on us (8). Peterson's *The Message* paraphrase says "He (God the Father) wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son." And again, "He (God) thought of everything, providing for everything we could possible need."

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us assurance of the heavenly Father's provision of everything we need as we seek first his kingdom and righteousness (Matthew 6:33). Paul reminds us that God will meet all of our needs "according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). I'm beginning to realize that these promises of God's supply presuppose the responsibility of those of us who are blessed materially to be God's means of giving this supply to our needy brothers and sisters (As we see in 2 Corinthians 8 & 9). Giving to our needy brothers and sisters is the way we give to Christ and will be the criterion of saving grace when we stand before God's judgment seat (Matthew 25:31-46).

God's grace is his unmerited favor and his activity as well as provision in our behalf. Grace is his saving activity of mercy, forgiveness and the gift of eternal life, as we will consider in Ephesians 2. God has saved and continues to save us abundantly, and is always present with us to give us wisdom, courage, strength and the necessary provisions for life and service, and not for living self-centeredly, but for living the cruciform, self-denying life.

We are invited to indulge ourselves in the abundant wisdom available from the Scriptures as well as the power, presence and wisdom that come to us through the Holy Spirit. And God has so much more to give us than we are ready and eager to receive. As James, in his wisdom book reminds us, we do not have because we do not ask God (4:2). We live as spiritual paupers when we should be living as children of the King of heaven.

Warren Wiersbe tells the story of "America's Greatest Miser," Hetty Green. When she died in 1916, Hetty "left an estate valued over \$100 million (You can imagine what the amount would be in today's dollars or Euros!). She ate cold oatmeal because it cost to heat it. Her son had to suffer a leg amputation, because she delayed so long in looking for a free clinic that his case became incurable. She was wealthy, yet she chose to live like a pauper....She was so foolish that she hastened

her own death by bringing on an attack of apoplexy while arguing about the value of drinking skim milk!” Wiersbe then continued by saying that “Hetty Green is an illustration of too many Christian believers today. They have limitless wealth at their disposal, and yet they live like paupers” (7).

Our sense of significance would increase greatly if we comprehended more of our access to God’s grace and the fact that he promises to not leave us as abandoned orphans (John 14:18), but will provide for us as pilgrims on the way of the cross.

We have the assurance that through our life in the Son we have assurance that God is working out everything in our lives “in conformity with the purpose of his will” (11). It should give us all an added sense of significance to realize that, even though we may be bewildered by present circumstances, Christ has a carefully thought out plan for us (11, Hoehner). One commentator notes that in verse 10, “Paul uses a significant term here that...was often used of adding up a column of figures. A contemporary way of putting it,” he says, “might be to say that in a world of confusion, where things do not ‘add up’ or make sense, we look forward to the time when everything will be brought into meaningful relationship under the headship of Christ” (Liefeld, 1791).

We were purchased through God the Son, who has a plan for our lives, even if they may seem in a shambles. As a friend reminded me recently, Christ is in our future as well as in our past and present, and whatever lies before us will eventually “add up” as his “good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).

And, finally, we are significant because...

We are kept by God the Holy Spirit (verses 13-14)

Paul notes how that we were included in Christ when we heard the word of truth, the good news of our salvation. And then, having believed, we were “marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit” (13). We are significant because we are kept by God the Holy Spirit...

Who lives and works within us

Unless we have the Holy Spirit within us, we cannot claim to be the children of God (Romans 8:9). We are born again by the power of the Holy Spirit, who comes into our lives the moment we first believe and who keeps us in Christ and who is actually Christ in us, our hope of glory (Colossians 1:27).

Because we are inhabited by the Holy Spirit, we have the presence of Christ and God as our Helper and Teacher (John 14:15-31; 16:5-16). The presence of the Holy Spirit transforms our mortal bodies into temples of the Holy Spirit, which are to be treated with honor and with holy living (1 Corinthians 6:18-20). The Holy Spirit lives in us to produce the fruit of the Spirit, the virtues of godliness (Galatians 5:22f), and to enable us to be bold and faithful witnesses (Acts 4:29-31; 6:8-10; 7:54-60).

If we could only practice the presence of God in us through the Spirit, we would realize how significant we are to God, who entrusts us to incarnate his presence in the world. Really recognizing his presence would also cause us to grieve him less by ungodly thoughts, words, attitudes and actions (Ephesians 4:30). Paul alludes to

the surpassing value of the presence of the Holy Spirit when he says that “we have this *treasure* in jars of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

The presence of the Holy Spirit is a reminder that our relationship with Christ is one of intimate friendship, which certainly should enhance our sense of significance. I like what Henri Nouwen says about this: “When Jesus died, the disciples’ friendship with him did not diminish. On the contrary, it grew. This is what the sending of the Spirit was all about. The Spirit of Jesus made Jesus’ friendship with his disciples everlasting, stronger and more intimate than before his death. This is what Paul experienced when he said, ‘It is no longer I, but Christ living in me’ (Galatians 2:20)” (Nouwen, 81).

The older I get, the more I value good friends, who enrich my life and add significance to my life. And to think that Jesus wants to be our friend and share his life with us for the present and for all eternity is beyond my comprehension (John 15:14)!

We should feel honored to know that God the Spirit chooses to live within us and wants to fellowship with us (Revelation 3:20). And his purpose is to constantly work on us to make us more into the likeness of Jesus Christ. And we have the assurance that his presence is not momentary or temporary. We are kept by the Holy Spirit...

Who is our assurance of future glory

Paul uses different images to strengthen our assurance that the Holy Spirit is within us to stay, from this point on and through eternity. He says the Holy Spirit seals us, that is, stamps us with a mark of God’s ownership (Robertson, 519). God puts an indelible mark of ownership on his people, one that cannot be erased (Revelation 22:4).

Paul also speaks of the Holy Spirit as our “deposit guaranteeing our inheritance” (14). It’s the concept of a down payment, or earnest money in a financial transaction. This Koine Greek word “arrabon” was “used of a woman selling a cow” who “received 100 drachmas as “arrabon,” assuring her the full payment was forthcoming (Hoehner, 242). This “arrabon” guarantee could also refer to an engagement ring, which is a pledge of the forthcoming marriage (Wood, 27), certainly of more to come!

The Holy Spirit is our enabler who keeps us safely in the love and saving grace of God and who walks with us through the pilgrimage of this earthly life. But also he is the assurance, the down payment, the “mark” upon us, and the engagement ring around us that assures us of a glorious everlasting life with Christ Jesus and his people in the new heaven and earth. The Holy Spirit within us assures us that we have been saved from sin’s penalty and power and some day we will be saved from sin’s presence (Hoehner, 245). We are significant because of what we are now, as God’s redeemed children, but we are significant because of what we shall become—exactly like Jesus in perfect holiness, reigning with him throughout eternity (1 John 3:2).

We need to realize also that as God’s redeemed kingdom people we are called to make a significant difference in his kingdom. Even the smallest act of love and kindness, as well as the quiet witness you give for Christ, can have eternal

consequences. What amazing significance it will be to hear our Savior and Lord says some day, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 25:23). We have the opportunity to contribute to God's glorious kingdom by bearing fruit that will last (John 15:16).

Conclusion:

At the conclusion of each of these Trinitarian bases for our significance, Paul expresses praise for God's glorious grace (6, 12, 14). We are significant because we have been chosen, redeemed and kept for the glory of God. We are called to add to the honor and wealth of God for all eternity. We exist for the pleasure of God and our life's purpose is, as the Westminster divines expressed in Question 1 of their Shorter Catechism, to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

We are significant because God delights in us and wants us to enjoy him and his people as he enjoys us. In the eternal kingdom we will fully realize how much he loves us, why he chose us and why he paid such a price for our redemption, and why he has kept us in his care all the way into everlasting life with him. Then and forevermore there will be no doubt whatsoever about our significance. Our significance will be magnified when we share Christ's glory forever (John 17:24). When we are glorified and share his reign over all creation there will be no question of our significance (2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 5:10; 20:6; 22:5).

We are significant because of who we are as children of the heavenly Father and friends of Christ Jesus, who lives in us through the Holy Spirit. We find our significance not by trying to discover who we are but by realizing *whose* we are.

Regardless of your standing with Christ, you have significance as God's creation in his image. But today he can repair what has been marred by sin and make you into a redeemed, remade child of God. This was the reason for the cross. The cross of Jesus tells you how much you are worth to God. You will find significance and a greater reason to live as you enter his kingdom and join in his purpose for your life within his will and kingdom. He has a carefully laid out plan for you. His plan all adds up, even though you may think you have failed terribly. His plan and purpose now may seem fuzzy and out of reach for you. But trust me. No, trust God, who's in the business of redemption. You are significant because you are God's dearly loved child.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. How does the world define success and in what ways can followers of Christ fall victim to the drive for worldly success?
2. In what ways is significance more important to the believer than success?
3. Why has the biblical doctrine (teaching) of God's foreknowledge, election and predestination of believers become a negative, controversial teaching for many?

4. What are the positive implications of God's election and choice of us?
5. Why do many believers fail to appreciate, appropriate and apply our riches in Christ in our daily lives?
6. What is the responsibility of the more affluent believer and church in God's care and provision for his people's needs? (See 2 Corinthians 8 & 9)
7. In what ways should the presence of the Holy Spirit in us increase our sense of significance?
8. Spend some time in prayer, reflecting on ways your life can have even greater significance in God's kingdom and for his glory.

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