

God's Long-Range Plan
Ephesians 1:14
Baraca Radio Sunday School Class
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INTRODUCTION

I married a planner. Pansy and I celebrated our wedding anniversary recently, and throughout fifty-three years, Pansy has usually taken time to think through the best way to accomplish what needs to be done. I'd say she's a long-range planner. For me, an example of long-range planning would be my asking her Saturday morning where she wants to go out for supper that night.

On the other hand, I took part in truly long-range planning when I directed the editorial department for the Baptist Woman's Missionary Union's national office in Birmingham. As part of the professional staff at WMU, our editors worked years in advance to plan study materials in magazines for all ages from little girls in grade school all the way to senior-age women.

Editors planned the areas of Baptist missionary work in this country and overseas they wanted to emphasize in the magazines used in churches across the country. After each editor worked out the themes for her magazine, she recruited writers for those studies.

The writers came to the national office so the editor could review each writer's assignment and give contact information about missionaries in each area of missions. Writers usually had a year or more before the deadline for their study material. They got in touch with the mission workers to learn about their work and then wrote their stories. Then the writers sent their finished materials to the editors who edited the materials and had the artists plan the layout. The finished versions of the studies went to the printing company, and when the magazines came off the press, the shipping department got the packages ready to ship to churches around the country.

The editors coordinated their work with the rest of the professional staff. All this took a great deal of planning, and it went into a thick document we called The Dated Plan. Because many on the WMU staff were single women, some joker said The Dated Plan was put together by Undated Planners.

This morning, our Bible passage looks at the most detailed planner of all time and eternity. Namely, the Lord our God.

God's plan for us is much bigger, much grander than we can ever imagine. In this first chapter of Ephesians, God, the Greatest Planner of them all, looks down the centuries and millennia. In His care for us and for all He has made: He gave us a plan for all time to come and on beyond time.

The key verse for our consideration, verse 10, calls God's plan, "*a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], all things in heaven and things on earth.*" How do you wrap your brain around that? *a plan for the fullness of time.* We think we're doing something big if we measure time by the century. On the other hand, for scientific minds, the day or the hour or the minute or the second can be broken down even further. They speak of nanoseconds. I'm talking about more than I can comprehend when I use the word, but they tell me a nanosecond equals one billionth of a second. That is beyond me. I cannot grasp what I just said — splitting one second, the snap of a finger, into billionths. That's billionth with a "B," one billionth of a second.

As the psalmist gazed — or gaped — in wide-eyed and open-mouthed wonder at the night sky, he cried out to God: *When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?* (NIV).

God can move to the fullness of time from in less time than it takes to say nanosecond. If that boggles your mind, I'm glad. In Romans (11:34) and in First Corinthians (1:26), the Apostle Paul raises the question: Who can know the mind of God? The answer, of course, is "Nobody but God."

So, here in Ephesians 1, Paul swims around in deep, deep water. About all I can do is wade around in the shallows and try to catch a glimpse of him out there beyond me in the depths. This letter starts off as most Pauline letters do, claiming authority as an apostle and praying for his readers to receive grace and peace. So we feel comfortable with those familiar words.

Peace comes from an inner awareness of the presence of God in our lives, rather than from external circumstances.

The word *grace* points to God's loving kindness to us. As Paul emphasizes over in the second chapter of Ephesians, we are saved by grace as we respond to God in faith. God does not wait to accept us to Himself until we get good enough and do enough good works. Grace means, it's all from God. We don't earn grace. If we had to earn it, it would not be grace. In chapter 2, he spells that out:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (2:8-10).

God expects us to DO good works as we respond to His grace. God has things He wants us to do, but the good works come AFTER we're saved. They don't get us saved.

Here in chapter 1, Paul mentions peace once and grace three times and then, as we just noticed, he gets back to grace in the second chapter and spells out what he means by grace. We know — or think we know — about peace and grace. But the more he talks about God's grace, we realize he's getting into that deep water. He says

God has adopted us. We get the general concept of adoption, but it's not that simple to think about ourselves as God's adopted children. But then Paul says this adoption came as God *destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will*. In the King James Version, Paul doesn't just say *destined*, he says, *predestined*. When you hear *predestined*, that opens up all sorts of questions.

For the moment, let's just make a quick note for ourselves to say, when the New Testament talks about *predestination*, it is not negative. Paul does not deal with dark questions you might have. He talks positively of what God provides for those He has adopted as His children. Before we finish this morning, we will see how Paul spells out a much wider application when it comes to predestination.

We have had adoptions in my larger Webb family circle. My younger brother Leonard and his wife adopted a little boy named David about the age of our sons. To look at David and his adoptive cousins, you cannot tell who is adopted and who isn't. On the other hand, my nephew Travis and his wife Christy adopted a whole houseful of children you could tell at a glance were not their birth children. After college, Travis spent two years doing mission work in Africa and came home deeply aware of orphans and abused and deserted children over there. So he and Christy felt the Lord leading them to adopt a couple of African children. That soon led to two or three more. That went on until they had eight or ten. Honestly, I lost count.

We've seen only one of those adopted great nieces and nephews — a beautiful, intelligent young woman named Emma. She has been living with my youngest brother Lew and his wife Shelia, her adoptive grandparents. On our trips to Texas the past few years, we have gotten to know and love Emma as part of our ever-increasing Webb family circle. Her adoptive parents and adoptive siblings live in Kansas, and it would take a caravan to travel down from Kansas to Texas to see kinfolks.

If you are a white American, you might be asking, Why on earth would this young couple want to adopt a bunch of children of another race and from another continent? They don't look like you. They're from a totally different culture. They'll have to make all kinds of adjustments, and *your* lives will never be the same. How will your neighbors respond? What about your church? How will they do in school?

We might well ask ourselves that about God adopting people from a swarm of different backgrounds. Why would He mess with us in the first place? Without His love and grace and forgiveness, we're helpless, hopeless sinners. I grew up hearing, "We're just a bunch of sinners saved by God's grace." We may not hear that a lot any more. But that's the gospel truth.

George W. Stroup offers this insight:

Those chosen by God in Christ belong to God not because of blood or family; rather, God

"destined us for adoption" (v. 5). Their inheritance is utterly gratuitous. Election is not a right but a gift. All those who have been justified by God's grace . . . are "partakers of the grace of adoption." As adopted children they belong to God not by virtue of family or law, but sheerly by God's goodwill. Those who look first at themselves and what they find in their own hearts and souls cannot help but be discouraged. If, however, they look not at themselves but at Christ, and if they see in Christ the grace and mercy of God, they should find assurance they are included in the promises of God's grace and mercy. . . . If all are in Adam by virtue of their sin, so too all are in Christ by means of his grace (Stroup).

We hear such words gladly. God has reached out in love to us as miserable sinners. We did nothing. We *could* do nothing to save ourselves. It was all of God in Christ. But many of us have great difficulty applying that to all sorts of people.

Ancient Israel considered itself a special Chosen People and didn't readily acknowledge God's loving acceptance of others. Remember Jonah who ran away when God told him to go to Nineveh, seat of a larger nation who had attacked them. The main lesson of the book of Ruth is to remind the Jews that their highly respected King David had this foreign woman in his ancestry, along with a harlot named Rahab.

The later prophet Isaiah had to tell the people of his generation: . . . *the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising* (60:3 KJV). And again, "*I, the LORD, have called you for a righteous purpose, and I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and appoint you to be a covenant for the people and a light to the nations* (42:6).

It took a while for New Testament leaders such as Peter and Paul to get the message of God's inclusive love. A few weeks ago, we saw how Simon Peter had this vision of all sorts of food that a devout Jew would not eat — could not eat, according to the conditioning of his conscience.

God told him to kill and eat the food, and he said he didn't eat anything unclean. The unseen voice said, sternly, "What God has made clean, you must not call common or unclean" (Acts 10:15). While our man Simon pondered that, some men — foreigners, gentiles — showed up at the door asking to see him. God sent these men to ask him to go with them to a non-Jewish audience and preach salvation.

Paul had an even worse attitude. Before he had that earthshaking encounter with Christ in a vision on the road, Paul did everything he could to wipe out Christianity completely. He went around trying to get these Christians killed. When Paul had his great turnaround, his fellow Jewish Christians objected, and it took a conference between the two sides to reach a compromise before they recognized Paul's call to the Gentiles as legitimate.

That's been difficult for Christian leaders to learn across the centuries. Roman Catholic popes led the wars against the Muslims in the Christian Holy Land. In Spain, the Church ran all the Jews and Muslims out of the country. How could such abuse be in God's plan?

After Martin Luther sparked the Protestant Reformation, this turned into outright war between various branches of Christianity. Luther and John Calvin carried out slaughter of their opponents. How could such abuse be in God's plan?

Since 9/11, many Americans have developed suspicion and hate toward all Muslims. This has led to Christians burning mosques and attacking and killing Muslims. How could such abuse be in God's plan?

We also find less violent ways to shut out fellow Christians. If I go to a Catholic mass, I am not invited to take communion. When I've gone to mass with friends, they cautioned me not to take the bread or the wine. If I want to feel part of the service, I can go forward with my hands folded across my chest. With that stance, the priest will give me a blessing. How could this be in God's plan?

Such exclusion happens many places. At one time, back in the church in Sweetwater that licensed me to the ministry, our pastor decided to exclude everyone who was not a member of that congregation. Before the deacons began passing the bread and the cup, he stressed this was only for members of that one church. To keep any others from participating, he asked all members to stand so the deacons could serve only those of us who stood. How could such restriction be in God's plan?

Recall our key verse concerning God's plan: Paul calls it "*a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], all things in heaven and things on earth.*" Hear those first words again: *a plan for the fullness of time.*

Paul also uses that term *the fullness of time* in Galatians, chapter 4, verses 4-6, referring to Jesus birth: *But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*

With our limited understanding, our lack of spiritual discernment, you and I cannot determine the fullness of God's time. For example, I have dear friends and family members who believe they have a sure word regarding the time of Christ's return. While I love and respect these folks, I have to remind myself and remind them that Jesus said He didn't know when He would come back to wind up things. He said

angels didn't know. He said only God the Father knew. When people ask whether I think some new crisis means Christ is about to come back, I say, "Jesus said He didn't know when He would return, and I don't want to put myself in the position of thinking I know more than Jesus."

Just keep in mind what Paul tells the Ephesians: in that *plan for the fullness of time, [God will] gather up all things in [Christ], all things in heaven and things on earth.*"

All things. That's about as inclusive as you can get. *All things.* If words have meaning, you can't leave anything or anybody out of God's all-inclusive *all things.* Even so, we often try to exclude this nationality, that religion, some other group whom we just cannot work into our scheme of things.

The all-inclusive grace —

is above all else an affirmation that the God Christians know in Jesus Christ is gracious beyond

the wildest reaches of their imaginations. Election is important, therefore, because it is a part

of the theological identity of Christians. It says something important about who God is

and about who those people are who have freely and undeservedly received God's grace in Jesus Christ" (Stroup).

Paul says we are dealing with a *mystery*. When we hear that word, we think of a puzzle,

something we need to figure out. But the biblical use of mystery is different. It is something new

to humanity, something they have probably not puzzled over, rather, something known only

to God which He makes known through revelation (Gould 23).

In First Corinthians 15, as Paul discusses our resurrection hope, he says this has been unknown till God revealed it. He writes:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

So Resurrection makes possible this all-inclusive plan: "*a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], all things in heaven and things on earth.*" This is available to all people of all generations to come. But this all-inclusive plan is more than the gathering up of all things in Christ. We don't lose sight of the individual as the recipient of God's gracious generosity. It all comes home to us, to you and to me, one by one.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells her childhood memory of her grandmother that makes her think of how God lavishes undeserved goodness. As a child, she saw her grandmother as tough and stern, known mostly for "her shrewd business sense and her bad temper." She felt intimidated just to look at the old woman. She had both legs amputated from untreated diabetes, and she wore dark aviator sunglasses to protect her eyes. This made Taylor think of "a handicapped bomber pilot." But she lavished her love on her grandchildren. When they came to visit, she provided special treats, piles of presents, and long, lazy afternoons together. Each child received a night of special pampering.

Taylor describes her special night with her grandmother:

. . . she treated me like long lost royalty, filling the tub with suds and then beckoning me in,
where she washed each of my limbs in turn and polished my skin with her great soft sponge.

After she had dried me off . . . she anointed me with Jergen's Lotion. . . . Then she reached

for her dusting powder—Evening in Paris—and tickled me all over with the pale blue puff.

When she had done, I knew I was precious. I was absolutely convinced I was loved.

Karen Chakoian likened the grandmother's treatment to God's plan for the ages in Ephesians:

"The flowing words of our passage envelop us with that kind of love: excessive, tender, richly

abundant. Yet the language of Ephesians is not individualistic. As beloved as we are,

we are lifted up into something far greater than ourselves. We are blessed in Christ,

we are chosen in Christ, we are destined for adoption through Christ. In Christ we have obtained

our inheritance, and our hope is set on Christ. Moreover, the constant plural pronouns remind us

that this gift is not an individual blessing but always for the community of Christ (Chakoian).

BENEDICTION

Now, as we conclude this week's Baraca Radio Sunday School Class from Anderson's First Baptist Church, I urge you to think further about this boundless love

God expressed in His great plan for all eternity. As you do, then claim these promises:

God's love that will never let you go,
God's grace that is greater than all your sin,
And God's peace that passes all understanding.
These are yours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

SOURCES

Karen Chakoian, Commentary on Ephesians 1, *Feasting on the Word*. Borrowed from Josh Hunt.

E.P. Gould, "Commentary on the Epistles to the Corinthians," *An American Commentary on the New Testament*, Volume V, ed. Alvah Hovey. Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1887.

George W. Stroup, Commentary on Ephesians 1, *Feasting on the Word*. Borrowed from Josh Hunt.