

Well, it is good to be back as I said at the start of the service. I spent a couple weeks with my family just relaxing and taking a break from the usual routines of life. And then I also spent a week on study leave, laying out sermons for the next year, starting with the next series after this one. And I am really looking forward to the sermon series we will be in this year. But before we get there, we have our current series to continue through as we look at the Holy Spirit this summer.

This morning's passage is from Ephesians, Paul's letter to the church in the city of Ephesus. Ephesus (**Picture**) began about 1000 B.C. on the west coast of present-day Turkey, though it was part of the Roman Empire at the time Paul wrote. It was a seaport town on the



Mediterranean Sea, pretty much due East of Athens, Greece. Ephesus was one of the major centers of commerce and culture in the first century A.D.; not the biggest city, but significant, none-the-less. Perhaps it was a little like Seattle's place in the U.S. today: we're not the largest city in America, but the region is still a major influencer in the U.S. and beyond in different areas such as music, arts, culture, higher education, business, technology, commerce, and more – though definitely not professional baseball. Maybe the Kraken will be more successful in hockey. So Ephesus was kind of like that – a significant city in a lot of different ways, even if not the largest. And: **There in Ephesus the gospel message took root in the lives of some people who Paul mentored in the faith and they became the beginnings of the church in their city.**

And these first 14 verses of this letter are magnificent, in a certain sense. In terms of the theological depth and presentation of the Christian message in a short passage, these verses certainly are magnificent. In another sense, they're ridiculous, because after the first two verses, the rest of what we just read is all one big honking sentence in Greek. 12 verses, one sentence. If this were submitted for grading in a grammar class, it would have red ink all over it. But this communicates the urgency with which Paul communicated. It's as

if Paul – who was in prison when he wrote this, in fact what we might call it a “theological quarantine”, because he was in prison for his faith – it’s like he just couldn’t wait to get out of him what he wanted to say to his brothers and sister in Christ in Ephesus. And so it all just comes bursting forth in one long sentence. Thank the Good Lord that our English translations have broken it down to more manageable sentence sizes for us, because it’s complex enough as it is.

Now, we looked at this passage four and a half years ago, so I know I don’t need to go into all the details of this passage because you certainly remember everything I said in that message. ☺ But in case you might not remember, I do want to re-highlight one thing that comes out of this, and then we’ll get to one thing we didn’t cover before. The first thing, and this is vitally, vitally important to understand is that: **God chooses us.** We don’t choose God; God chooses us. We do have a response to believe God and trust Jesus and live by faith. But that is our response to God initiating things by choosing us. And he chooses us “in Christ.” It’s impossible to miss the Christo-centric nature of these verses. Through Jesus, God chooses us. God chooses you – to love you, to lavishly bestow his grace upon you, to bless you with spiritual blessings, to make you holy and blameless in his sight, to adopt you into His family, to redeem you, and so that you and I would bring God praise and glory. All of that comes out of the first few verses here.

And it’s not like Paul is just making this up out of the blue. We see in Jesus’ life and in his teaching all over the place. **Jesus even says to his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I have chosen you” (John 15:16).** Which, when you look back at how the disciples came to be Jesus’ disciples, is exactly what happened. And by the way, that wasn’t how it usually happened in their day with mentor/teacher relationships. Usually, the one who wants to be taught approached the teacher and asked if that person will be their mentor or their teacher. In fact, that’s how it usually happens today, too, in almost any context. When I was younger and taking lessons on the piano and later on the trumpet, I never had one teacher who came to me and said, “Hey, could I be your teacher?” No. I had to ask them to be my teacher. And then on top of that my parents had to pay for the lessons. Jesus invites these guys to follow him, and he doesn’t charge them a penny.

So, it's all backwards: He chooses them. And Jesus still does the choosing. And: **The really Good News is that he chooses you.** God desires that all people would come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. God so loved the whole world that He sent his one and only son. Jesus says “*whoever* hears these words of mine and puts them in to practice” is wise. God chooses you through Jesus Christ.

And this choosing is not based on anything you've done, or based on any circumstances in our lives. He chose you before the foundation of the world. Before Gwen would go out on a date with me, we were friends for 10 months or so. Somewhere in those 10 months, my heart became set on her, but it took her a while to have her eyes opened and see the light in regards to me. And those months seemed like an eternity to me. Well: God has had his heart set on you since before the foundations of the earth. That's a long time! And nothing you can say or do or have happen to you changes that. Not even Coronavirus has changed this.

Maybe when you were a kid – or maybe you are a kid and you have experienced this not that long ago – maybe you played a game where a group of you divided into two teams, with captains each choosing their teammates. If you're ever one of the last couple people to be chosen, it can be a little dejecting, perhaps. And if it happens over and over it can induce stress and trauma even. But you see: **God didn't wait until there was no one left but you in order to pick you: God chooses you, in Christ, before the creation of the world.** If you don't have that 4th verse underlined in your Bible, you should. And in the margin you can write, “This includes me!” Not “me” as in “your pastor” but “me” as in “you.” God chooses *you*. And Paul is saying here that He has chosen you since the dawn of creation. God had you in mind and chose you.

No matter your background, your socio-economic status, your skin color, your state of health, your accomplishments in life, your generousities, your abilities, your family size, your grades in school, your addictions, your sins, your relationship status...or anything else we could say or do that might cause people to choose us or not...regardless of any of that, God has chosen

you. He chose you first through Jesus Christ, along with everyone else. He chooses to be in relationship with you, transforming you, renewing you, forgiving you, constantly working on you so you'd live into being the person he created you to be. So you'd more fully experience what it means to be created in His image.

Will you believe that? Will you trust God for that? Will you respond in faith to God choosing you? I hope so. It's a life-changing thing to rest in the fact that God has chosen you. You get the sense in this letter that maybe some of the people in the church there in Ephesus weren't so sure. Or maybe perhaps Paul wrote this knowing that some people who might hear this letter read wouldn't already be Christ-followers.

He writes in the first half of verse 13, **“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (Ephesians 1:13a)**. It's a message of reassurance that they “also” are included. That God “also” chooses them through Christ and the gospel message. There's a sense that the Paul knew the readers of the letter might not be real sure that they are also chosen by God. Probably it was because they were Greek and didn't have a Jewish background.

Whatever it was, Paul assures them that they are included in God's grace. The net is wide enough to include them, even if they have some doubts. And maybe that describes you this morning. Take heart, and be assured, that God chooses you *also*. Will you “hear the message of truth, the gospel of salvation” ...will you hear that – not just the physics of soundwaves interacting with your eardrums...of course you're *hearing* this – what Paul means, and what I mean is: will you let this message of salvation sink in. Will you consider it, give it serious consideration, come to faith, and then choose Jesus back, just as he has chosen you? I hope you will, because if you do, you are included *also*.

And then that brings us to the last verse-and-a-half where Paul writes, **“When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his**

glory” (Ephesians 1:13b-14). This is where we see that God seals the deal. You see, we do have a part to play when we trust God and put our faith in Jesus, but on one side is God choosing us, and on the other is God sealing it with the Holy Spirit. It’s like a sandwich, with God on either side and you in the middle.

Paul writes in the last part of verse 13: “you were marked in him with a seal.” He means that you are marked in Jesus with a seal – Jesus is who “him” is referring to. Now, just to clarify because for some people – especially for any kids who are listening – this might be confusing. And this possible confusion occurred to me because for a few days this August my family spent some time on Puget Sound and we saw a few seals – the kind that swim in the water.

But that is not the kind of seal Paul is speaking of. He’s speaking of a seal on a letter that verified the authorship of the letter, **such as this one** from Jerusalem that dates to about the 7th Century B.C. The seal was typically wax, or if that couldn’t be afforded someone might use ink like we would with a stamp. And it was applied with an engraved stone or other hard material, so that the wax seal took the shape of the engraving on the stone. For you kids, you can think of it like a rubber stamp that you press into an ink pad and then stamp a paper.



It was a way to give the document authority and authenticity – much like getting a document notarized today. It lets the recipient know that this document is legitimate and authoritative because it has the author’s seal on it.

Well, Paul is saying here – and this theme is throughout Scripture – He’s saying that your relationship with Jesus is marked with a seal, which is the Holy Spirit. **The Holy Spirit is a mark upon your life – upon your very soul – that authenticates your relationship with Jesus.** It let’s God the Father know that you belong to Jesus; remember, Jesus tells us in the gospel of John that He is the one who sends the Spirit. And one thing that the Spirit does, is that it marks us with a seal, authenticating us as belonging to Jesus.

Now, we cannot see this seal ourselves. We cannot see the Spirit. God has eyes to see it, but we do not. And his ability to see this seal is what matters. But we do see evidence of the Spirit – such as with the fruit of the Spirit and the Gifts of the Spirit – and we’ll look at those each of the next two Sundays. And we also have a significant sign of the Spirit’s sealing work, too. **The sign of the Spirit’s sealing work is baptism.** This doesn’t mean you have to be baptized in order to be marked by the Spirit – God’s Spirit is not somehow limited or controlled by what we do or to not do. But Baptism is a significant way that we recognize and acknowledge the work of the Spirit in our lives.

This is an important theological distinction about Baptism: It’s a sign of what God’s Spirit is doing in the life of the person being baptized. Baptism is not so much about the person believing in Jesus; it’s about recognizing God’s work in that person’s life. It’s recognizing that that person was chosen by God before the foundations of the earth were laid...before the person could even express faith in Jesus. And if you have not been baptized, I would encourage you to consider doing so. It’s a profound way to recognize the sealing work of the Spirit.

But it’s not a requirement for being marked with the seal of the Spirit. **If you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you are already marked with that seal of the Holy Spirit.** You are authenticated as a believer in Jesus who belongs to Jesus for now and all eternity. God has chosen you before the foundations of the earth were created, and through faith in Jesus you belong to God: marked with the seal of the Spirit, guaranteeing that you are an heir to all that God has in the life to come, when the full redemption of God’s people takes place.

So there’s not some big exhortation this morning about what you have to do to be sealed by the Spirit. It’s something the Spirit does and you can’t control it. But if you want that seal of the Spirit...if you want to be authenticated as being in relationship with God, the one thing you can do is come to faith in Jesus. You’ve already been chosen for that since before the foundation of the earth; now we live into it by faith. And the Spirit will then mark your soul for all eternity, guaranteeing you a place in the Kingdom of God. Let’s pray...Amen.