

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 11, 2018**

**TOP TEN REASONS TO PRAISE GOD: PART 3**

**Ephesians 1:3-14**

As we continue to look at the apostle Paul's top ten reasons to praise God, we return this morning to Ephesians 1. We will focus primarily on verses 8-10 today, but, in the interest of seeing the bigger picture, I'm going to read verses 3-14. I invite you to follow along in your Bible or in the Pew Bible, where you can find it on page 827. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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For better or worse, Election Day 2018 has now come and gone. While the outcomes of a few elections remain uncertain (Florida mainly), the sky has not fallen. Not yet anyway. Whatever your feelings about the elections, I want to share with you four truths to remember, courtesy of John Stonestreet from Breakpoint Daily and the Colson Center for Christian Worldview. Not a top ten list but, in this case, a top four. Regardless of the final election results, here are four things to remember and take to heart as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ:

1. Jesus is risen. He is not dead. He is alive. He is not defeated. He has won the victory over sin and death, and will have the final victory over Satan and all the forces of evil.
2. Jesus is Lord. It was true before Election Day. It was true on Election Day. It was true the day after Election Day. It is true today. And it will never change. It is true, as Luther wrote (and as we sang last Sunday) that Satan, "our ancient foe, does [still] seek to work us woe." It is true that "His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal." But Jesus is more than Satan's equal. Jesus is Lord. And, to quote Luther again: "Though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo use, we will not fear, for God has willed His truth to triumph through us." (Quotes from Luther, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.") And in us.

Satan is a formidable foe. He is a powerful enemy. But Jesus is more than his equal. Satan will not win. Jesus is Lord. The ultimate victory is His. And because He is Lord, we are more than conquerors through Him, no matter what the enemy of our souls tries to do to us (Romans 8:37).

Jesus is risen. And Jesus is Lord.

3. Jesus will restore all things. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. But Aslan, of course, was a Christ-figure. The way things are in the world is not how they are meant to be. The day will come when Jesus returns to set everything right and establish God's kingdom forever. *Maranatha!* Come, Lord Jesus!

4. Until then, or until we take our last breath, we – you and I and all of God’s people – are called to live faithful, godly lives in this cultural moment. In this time. In this place. Regardless of who is in the White House. Regardless of which party has the majority in the House of Representatives or the Senate. Regardless of what you think of the media. Regardless of which way the political and cultural winds are blowing at any given moment.

We are called to be faithful witnesses to the truth of the gospel in this time and place. We are called to be ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20) in a world that is largely hostile, or at least indifferent, to His claims. We are called, as Paul says in Philippians 2, to “shine like stars” in the midst of “a crooked and perverse generation” (Philippians 2:15). This moment, like every moment in history, is what Francis Schaeffer would call a “How Should We Then Live?” moment.

Jesus is risen. Jesus is Lord. Jesus will come again and restore all things. And we are called to live for Him in this time and place.

To these four truths, let me add two more:

5. We are not alone. You are not alone. God is with us. Jesus promised to be with us always, even to the end of the world (Matthew 28:20). No matter what. No matter where you go, God is there with you. You are never alone. Remember David’s Prayer in Psalm 139:

Where can I go from Your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from Your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, You are there.  
If I make my bed in the depths, You are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there Your hand will guide me,  
Your right hand will hold me fast.  
(Psalm 139:7-10)

Though Jesus is no longer present with us physically, He is with us in the person of the Holy Spirit. Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit’s presence, and the significance of the Spirit’s presence in our lives, in verses 13 and 14 of our text from Ephesians 1. We will get to that eventually (probably next Sunday).

When you face adversity, God is with you. When you face uncertainty, God is with you. When your world is falling apart, God is with you. When you feel like giving up, God is with you. When temptation threatens to undo you, God is with you. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is with you (Psalm 23:4). There is never a time when God is not with you. No matter what goes wrong in your life or in the world, God is with you. Believe, embrace, and live out the promise that nothing can ever separate you from His love (Romans 8:39).

Listen to the words of Moses from Deuteronomy 33:27. In blessing the 12 tribes of Israel right before he died, Moses said:

The eternal God is your refuge,  
and underneath are the everlasting arms.

*His everlasting arms.*

No matter how low or hard-pressed you may feel, God Himself is still your refuge, your place of protection and security. And His loving arms will always hold you. He will never let go of you.

6. Not only is God with you, He is for you. In Romans 8:31, Paul asks: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Implicit in Paul’s question is the conviction that God is in fact for us. The fact that God is for us is demonstrated beyond any shadow of a doubt by the lengths to which God has gone to rescue us from our slavery to sin, to redeem us, to save us, to forgive us, to adopt us as His beloved children, and, as Paul says in verses 7 and 8, to lavish the riches of His grace on us.

That God is for us – that God is for *you* – is proven by the cross. Jesus didn’t have to go to the cross. But He chose to. Freely. Voluntarily. Out of love. He gave up His life for you and me. And God did not stop being for us at the cross. He *is* for us and *will* be for us – for you and me – for all time and eternity. Not because we deserve it, but because He loves us. And because He loves us, He has decided that we are worth it.

I hope these truths will give you some assurance (or reassurance) and encouragement, some spiritual fortification for the living of these days.

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Now, returning to Paul’s top ten reasons to praise God, let’s review reasons 1-5:

Reason #1: We praise God because He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (1:3).

Reason #2: We praise God because, in His free and sovereign grace, He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be the objects of His saving love and “to be holy and blameless in His sight,” set apart by Him and for Him to serve His kingdom purposes in this world (1:4). Though we were “by nature objects of wrath,” as Paul says in Ephesians 2:3, God chose to make us trophies of His grace. Which is an amazing thing.

Reason #3: We praise God because, in His great love, He predestined us to be adopted as His children – His sons and daughters – in and through His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ (1:4-5). Doing so gave God immense pleasure. It gave Him enormous pleasure to include us, undeserving as we are, in His spiritual family (1:5).

Reason #4: We praise God because He redeemed us – He emancipated us, He set us free from our captivity to sin – through the blood of Jesus shed for us in His death on the cross. Jesus paid the price necessary to ransom us from our sins and their power over us. What we could not do for ourselves, and what nobody else could do for us, Jesus did for us. For *you*. It is why Jesus came: “Not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Reason #5: We praise God because He forgave our sins. All of them. True forgiveness is always an act of grace. It is not deserved. You cannot earn it. It is a gift made possible through Jesus and His saving work on the cross. Remember:

Because He was forsaken, you are forgiven.  
Because He was condemned, you are accepted.  
Because He was rejected, you are redeemed.

Five resounding reasons to praise God. But there are more. Here is #6.

### **REASON #6**

We praise God because He has lavished His grace on us. This whole passage (1:3-14) is just dripping with grace. We see it explicitly in verse 6, where Paul speaks of God’s “glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves” (NIV). A more literal translation from the Greek would be “to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He graced us (*charitoo*) in the Beloved” – that is, in Jesus. The idea here is that God inundated us with His grace. He showered us with grace in great abundance.

We see it again in verses 7 and 8, where the apostle trumpets “the riches of God’s grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.” Grace, of course, is God’s free, sovereign, and loving favor. It comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. If you could ever do anything to deserve it, it would no longer be grace. God’s grace is and must be voluntary. If it is in some way required or coerced, it is no longer grace.

God is not stingy with His grace. He does not give grace grudgingly. He does not give us the minimum necessary for Him to be considered gracious. No. He lavishes His grace on us. He gives us grace in unending abundance. In choosing us before the creation of the world, in predestining us in love for salvation, in adopting us as His children, in redeeming us through the blood of Christ shed for us, in forgiving our sins, in blessing us with every spiritual blessing in Christ – in all these ways, He has lavished His grace on us.

His grace is sufficient for your salvation and mine. It is more than enough. His grace is sufficient to sustain you and strengthen you for your life as a follower of Christ. His grace is sufficient for you regardless of whatever hardships or heartaches you may have to endure. His. Grace. Is. Sufficient. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Somewhere along the way, Anne Lamott, who has written several books on Christian themes, such as *Traveling Mercies*; *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*; *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*; *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*; and *Small Victories: Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace*, said: “I do not at all understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.”

This is true because *the God of grace* meets us where we are but does not leave us where he found us, or *as* He found us. Instead, He lavishes His grace on us. His grace is the air we breathe, as essential to our spiritual life and well-being as oxygen is to our physical life.

### **REASON #7**

Here is Reason #7: We praise God because He made known to us the mystery of His will in the person and work of Jesus Christ His Son (1:9-10).

The dictionary defines *mystery* as something secret or hidden, something unknown that has not yet been revealed, explained, or understood. In a narrower sense, the word “mystery” can refer to a novel, play, or movie dealing with a puzzling crime, especially a murder. It is what we call a “whodunit.”

Creating a list of the top ten mystery writers or the top ten mystery novels of all time could be an entertaining enterprise. Any respectable list, I suppose, would have to include Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (of Sherlock Holmes fame) and Agatha Christie (creator of Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, and others). After them, there may be lots of room for debate.

There are plenty of real-life mysteries, too, such as:

- What really happened to Amelia Earhart and her navigator Fred Noonan when they disappeared while trying to fly around the world in 1937?
- Where is Jimmy Hoffa buried?
- What happened to the “lost colony” of Roanoke Island, whose English settlers disappeared without a trace?
- What about the Lost City of Atlantis? Was it real? If it was, what happened to it?
- And what happened to the biblical Ark of the Covenant? Does it still exist?

The way the word “mystery” is used in the Bible is a bit different. The word *musterion* occurs 27 times in the New Testament, 20 of them in the letters of Paul. It also occurs four times in the Book of Revelation, and three times in the Gospels – in Matthew’s, Mark’s, and Luke’s accounts of Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the sower and the soils to His disciples (Matthew 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10).

There are different nuances to the word, but the main idea, as both Jesus and Paul use it, is of something previously hidden or unknown that has now been revealed. This mystery, once hidden but now revealed out in the open, is the gospel itself – the plan of God for the salvation of sinners which God purposed in His Son Jesus Christ; the rescue operation God put into effect “in the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4), when the time was right and everything was ready; with the ultimate goal not just of saving sinners like us, as if that were

not enough, but of bringing everything in heaven and on earth under the leadership of Jesus Christ.

The mystery revealed in the gospel is how sinners like us can be saved and brought back into a right relationship with God. The mystery revealed in the gospel is what God Himself has done to save us in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. The mystery revealed in the gospel is that God has a plan for us and for this world that goes beyond your salvation and mine. His purpose is, as I noted earlier, to restore all things to the way they were meant to be. His purpose is to create one family in Christ. It is the vision of Revelation 7, where the apostle John sees “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language” joyously declaring the praises of our God and Savior (7:9-10). That is just a snapshot of what we have to look forward to when Jesus returns and God brings history as we know it to completion. This is the *telos*, the end, the goal toward which history is moving under the sovereignty of God.

### **EVERYBODY NEEDS TO KNOW IT**

God’s plan of salvation was once a mystery. But what was once hidden has been made known. And everybody needs to know it. Everybody. Which is one of the primary reasons the church exists: To get the word out. To let everybody know. To give everyone the opportunity to embrace the gospel. To embrace the Savior. It is not the only reason the church exists. Our church’s constitution, the EPC Book of Order, says that while “it is the privilege and primary responsibility of the local church to worship God regularly – the primary mission of the local church (is) to evangelize, making disciples by extending the gospel both at home and abroad....” (EPC Book of Government 4-2 and 4-3).

These top ten reasons Paul gives us to praise God provide us with an impetus to Christian witness and service. Do you see that? Will you commit yourself, or renew your commitment, not only to praise God for His incredible gifts of grace to you, but to let your praise overflow into words of witness and acts of service in the name of Jesus?

If we were all to do that this week, do you know what amazing things God might do in us? And through us? For *His* glory. I want to see what God will do. Don’t you?

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.