

**First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida**  
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“The Plan”

Ephesians 1:3-14 (NRSV)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, [4] just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. [5] He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, [6] to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. [7] In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace [8] that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight [9] he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, [10] as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. [11] In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, [12] so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. [13] In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; [14] this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

DESTINY IN OUR OWN HANDS

What plans do you have for the coming year? Is there something that you want to accomplish more than anything else?

Some of you might want a college degree. Others might want a new job. Perhaps you might want to save enough money to retire comfortably. Maybe you're planning to take a cruise or that vacation of a lifetime. Maybe you want to get married and start a family. All of us have a plan of some sort for the future, something to look forward to or work for.

And the beginning of the New Year is an especially good time to put those plans into perspective. Where is God in your plans for the future? Is God a part of your plans? Or do we think that our destiny is in our own hands?

You hear that phrase a lot toward the end of the football season. The sportswriters say of a certain team, "Their destiny is in their own hands." In other words if the team wins the rest of their games they will make the playoffs.

But, as the Tampa Bay Buccaneers found out last week against the Oakland Raiders, sometimes that's easier said than done.

In fact that common phrase used in sports (like so many phrases used in sports) is nonsensical. Destiny by definition is something that we can't control. Destiny (our ultimate fate) is not and never will be in our hands.

Doris Day had it right. The future is not ours to see or control.

And so our plans for the coming year must always have a very important stipulation. I will accomplish this thing or take that trip ... "Lord willing."

We often use that phrase in a tongue in cheek way. We say, "I'll see you next week ... Lord willing and the creek don't rise."

But, really this important proviso is no laughing matter. It should be a part of how we view the future. Our plans might not mesh with God's plans. And so we should approach the coming year with a considerable amount of humility and reserve.

## SMALL RESOLUTIONS

I guess this is why New Year's resolutions often seem so silly. Our plans and hopes for the future are too small. Quite frankly whether you and Oprah lose weight together this year is not that important!

New Year's resolutions highlight the fact that when it comes to our plans for the future the problem is not that we expect too much. The problem is that we expect too little.

Our worth is not tied to how we look or our age or our financial net worth. We say that we believe that, but our actions tell a different story.

We are wedded to those things. We plan to improve ourselves in those areas every year. The top three resolutions every year are to lose weight, improve our health and save more money.

Unfortunately none of these things can give us what we really need. Even if our plans are successful it is unlikely that these accomplishments alone will make us feel like a success.

But, more often than not our plans won't be successful. We won't lose as much weight in the coming year as we want to lose. We won't make as much money as we would like to make. And our failures to keep our resolutions will make us feel anxious and sad.

We may even resolve not to make any more New Year's resolutions because we are so frustrated with our lack of progress.

## GOD'S PLAN

But, I believe that having a plan for the coming year is important. I just think that we need to have the right plan. We have to give up the belief that God's ways are our ways. They're not. In fact the Bible tells us just the opposite. God's ways are *not* our ways.

And unlike football players we Christians do not believe that our destiny is in our own hands. We believe that our destiny is in God's hands.

That might be a good way to summarize our lesson from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We might not have God in our plans, but we are in God's plan. I like the way Bill Bright put it. In his first spiritual "law" that he used to introduce nonbelievers to the Christian faith he wrote, "God loves you and has a plan for your life."

I have found that when you tell someone this they are often incredulous. God loves me and has a plan for my life? Why I don't even have a plan for my life. Or they may say something like,

"I have my own plans. Who is this God who wants to take over my life?"

But, God does indeed have a plan for our life. This is what the Bible says. In fact Paul makes this statement even more radical. He tells us that God had a plan for our life before we even had a life!

Imagine that. Before we were born God in heaven had a plan for our lives. According to our lesson for today, "God in Christ has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" and "chose us in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world."

Now that is super predestination! This doctrine is found throughout the Bible. God chooses people. God controls the destiny of people for God's own purposes.

## JEREMIAH

The great Old Testament example of this biblical principle is the prophet Jeremiah. God told Jeremiah that he had a plan for his life. He said, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

But, Jeremiah did not think that prenatal calls were valid. He didn't think that he could be God's prophet. Besides he had other plans for his life. He was too young and inexperienced. He hadn't been to seminary and taken a course in preaching.

The reluctant prophet told the Lord, "I do not know how to speak. I am only a child."

And God told Jeremiah, "You have forgotten who is doing the calling. I'm God. You're not. You must go." God gave Jeremiah the words he needed, but God did not let Jeremiah get out of the role that the prophet was destined to play. God had a plan for Jeremiah's life.

For those who think that life is a do it yourself project this is really a hard concept to grasp. It goes against what all the self help books say. It goes against how we live.

And yet this is the central message of the Bible. It's not all about us. It's about God and God's plan for our life. Some see this as really bad news and fight against following God's plan for much of their life.

But, I have come to believe that living according to God's plan for our life instead of trying to forge our own plan is a much easier and a more satisfying way to live.

## SENSE OF PURPOSE

First, it gives us a sense of purpose. According to our passage for today, God in Christ has chosen us "before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love." (Ephesians 1:4)

Many wonderful leaders have been able to overcome tremendous odds and do great things because they had a sense of destiny. They felt chosen to do the job.

Sometimes these chosen ones can take themselves a bit too seriously and cause significant harm as well. But, there is also something to be said for a person who has a strong sense of direction, a calling in life.

Paul tells us that this sense of being called is not just for the "rich and famous." It is for all of us. We have all been chosen by God. We are God's adopted children. We are holy.

Holy does not mean perfect. It means being set aside for a special purpose. It means that God has a special plan for our life. God makes plans for us because he loves us and wants the best for us. God gives us a job that makes our life meaningful, and God challenges us to reach others in His name.

## MY KINGDOM COME

Like many of you I sometimes get frustrated with my job. I'm sure this comes as a shock to some of you. Some of you think that ministers don't get frustrated and angry. But, of course we do. Sometimes we hear one complaint too many, and sometimes we wonder if it is all worth it.

When I find myself getting frustrated and angry, I try to step back from what I'm doing and ask myself,

“Am I doing what God wants me to do or am I trying to promote my own agenda? Am I building God's kingdom or my own kingdom? Does God have plans for my life that are different from my current plans?”

Quite often the latter is the case. I've been saying “my kingdom come” instead of “thy kingdom come.” The source of my frustration is not the people who won't cooperate, but my own lack of attention to what God is truly calling me to do.

Sometimes that lack of cooperation is just God's way of getting my attention. Sometimes God sends us roadblocks so that we have to go in different direction.

Perhaps the same might be true in your life. If everything you're trying to accomplish in life seems to be failing, maybe you're trying to do the wrong thing. Maybe the plans you have for your life are not in line with God's plans. Maybe you've been saying “my kingdom come” instead of “thy kingdom come.”

So when we are open to living according to God's plan instead of our own plan, life takes on a sense of purpose. Even when we don't understand it fully, we learn from experience to trust God's leading.

## MISTAKES ALLOWED

So first, God's plan gives our lives purpose. And second God's plan makes allowance for our mistakes.

A second grade teacher asked her class, "What is cleanliness next to?" She hoping that someone might say godliness. But, one little boy piped up with a more honest answer, "impossible."

It is impossible for us to come clean. Sin always corrupts and messes up even our best, most noble plans. That's what the Bible tells us. Even our best deeds are like filthy rages before the glory of God. We fall short in all that we do.

I heard on the radio this week that the reason most people fail to keep New Year's resolutions is that they set the bar impossibly high.

"I will exercise every day this year." The gyms are filled with first time exercisers who have made this kind of commitment in January. But, guess what happens when they miss a day of exercise in February? "I'm a failure. I missed once." They hang their head and don't go back.

Or perhaps someone resolves not to eat any sweets in the coming year. They attend a birthday party and have a piece of cake. Their resolution is broken and so is their resolve. They may even go on a sweet eating binge and gain even more weight.

The same kind of pattern can be observed when a religious person sets impossibly high standards for themselves. They can maintain those standards for a while, but pretty soon they see their own hypocrisy and fall into despair.

They may even leave the church and engage in a lifestyle that is the very antithesis of the Christian way of life.

Why does this happen? It happens because sometimes we forget that God's plan for us is above all a gracious plan.

We turn faith into a harsh taskmaster instead of a word of forgiveness. God does not want to judge us harshly. God wants to call us back home.

In verses 6-7 Paul talks about the "glorious grace" and forgiveness that is "lavished upon us." This is God's mysterious plan. We are

destined not for the judgment we deserve but the forgiveness and freedom we don't deserve.

## MARIA AND CHRISTINA

Max Lucado tells a story about a loving mother named Maria who lived in a very small village in Brazil. Maria had a beautiful daughter named Christina who wanted more than anything to leave that little village to enjoy the bright light of Rio de Janeiro.

Knowing that her mom would never let her do this Christina decided to leave home. She packed a few personal items and left early one morning. Her mother Maria was heartbroken when she saw the note.

Maria quickly packed some things to go in search of her daughter. She stopped at a drugstore on the way to the bus station and spent most of her money having pictures of herself made in the photography booth. Maria knew Christina had no way of earning money, and she also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to ever give up.

So Maria searched in the worst parts of Rio de Janeiro, her heart breaking knowing that her daughter would have to do unthinkable things just to be able to survive. At each place Maria stopped-street corners, lobbies of seedy hotels, bathroom mirrors-she would write a note on the back of a picture of herself, a photo, and tape it up for everybody to see.

It didn't take long for the money and the pictures to run out, so eventually Maria had to return to her village without Christina, heartsick that her daughter was lost in that urban jungle of Rio. A month or so later, Christina descended the hotel stairs of one of those seedy hotels, her young face tired, her bright eyes faded into dull, her countenance fallen, and now full of fear and pain.

A thousand times she had longed to trade these countless beds for her secure pallet back home in her little village, but now the village seemed so far away in so many ways. As Christina reached the bottom of the stairs, she noticed something familiar.



There on the lobby bulletin board was a photo of her mother. Christina's eyes burned and her throat tightened. She removed the picture and written on the back of the photo was this message from her mother, Maria:

"Christina, whatever you've done, wherever you've been, it doesn't matter. Please come home."

And she did.

## A PICTURE OF GRACE

Sometimes we're like Christina. We leave home in search of a more exciting life. We insist on following our own plans instead of the plans of a Lord who loves us very much and knows what we really need. And one day we find ourselves in a really strange place.

But, there on the wall is this picture, this picture of grace. It is a cross, and on the cross is our Lord who stretches out his arms and tells us,

"This is how much I love you. Abandon your failed plans and trust my plans. Your sins are forgiven."

Communion celebrates that picture of grace, God's grace, grace that is greater than all our sin. Paul put it this way in our lesson for today,

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace [8] that he lavished on us." (Ephesians 1:7-8a)

I want to close by emphasizing that word "lavish." Lavish means "wild, abundant and unrestrained." It comes from a root word that means a "downpour of rain."

In communion God lavishes grace upon you and me. There's a downpour of God's mercy. The bread and the wine of communion are like that picture Maria left for her lost daughter. They remind us that God's plan for us was made before the world was created and was fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Now that plan comes into our life. It is a personal message of hope. God loves us and has a plan for our life.

Jesus tells us as he told disciples long ago, "This is my body which is broken for you. This is my blood which is shed for you."

All is forgiven. Come home.