

7/14/24 Maggie Keeler

Ephesians 1:3-14 from the Message - The God of Glory

3-6 How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

7-10 Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. *Abundantly* free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.

11-12 It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

13-14 It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This down payment from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.

In today's reading from Ephesians Paul provides us a wonderful reflection on the blessings that we receive from God.

- We are loved. "Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love"
- We are chosen. "Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ."
- We are forgiven. "Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. *Abundantly free!*"
- We have a purpose. "It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone."

It is this last blessing - a purpose - that I want to focus on today.

As many of you know, we ran vacation bible school or Stepping Stones Summer Camp earlier in the summer. Each day during camp, we used one of my favorite books "How Great is our God" to learn about a different animal and then used the animal to talk about how God provides for us and protects us and loves us.

For example, one day we learned about Thorny Devil lizards who drink through their spiny skin. And we read the story of the woman at the well and talked about how God quenches our thirst for forgiveness, love and understanding.

On another day, we learned about Sociable Weavers who build apartment style nests and bumblebee hummingbirds that build thimble sized nests. And we talked about how God protects us like a mama bird protects her babies.

On the final day we learned about meerkats. Meerkats are really amazing little creatures - especially the way they work together. They live in family groups called mobs or gangs. They not only work together to dig out the burrows they call home but they groom each other and hunt together. They take turns babysitting and standing guard. They each have their own job or purpose.

When I asked the kids why they thought I was talking about meerkats during chapel. One camper chimed in that "God had a gang too!" by which we figured out that she meant the 12 disciples. The kids jumped on the idea of God's gang and how he wants us to be a part of his gang too. So I asked them if they thought that there is a job for all of us in God's gang? Which got a resounding "YES!" so I asked them what they thought their talents are and how they might use them to help others as part of God's gang? They immediately volunteered ideas. "I have a talent for singing; I can sing a song in church...I have a talent for doing art; I could make someone a picture when

they are feeling sad " One after another the kids came up with a talent and ways they could use it to spread God's love and more and more ideas bubbled up. "I have a talent for making friendship bracelets; I could give a bracelet to someone so they felt less lonely...I'm funny. I can make someone smile when they are sad." We could have gone on and on with kids naming their own talents and the talents of their friends but we had to stop so we could pet a baby alligator.

Baby alligators aside, I wonder if I asked you the same questions if you would be as ready with an answer. What are your talents? how might you use those talents for the glory of God? Is there a job for you in God's gang?

As we get older we seem to struggle a lot more with these types of questions about our purpose, our place in God's creation, in his gang. Why is that?

Throughout the Bible we are assured that God has a plan for us, a purpose for us.

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." Jeremiah 29:11

"The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble." Proverbs 16:4

"Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone." Ephesians 1:11-12

As Pastor Shawna Schwaninger puts it "There is purpose in our creation. We are to transform the world for Jesus by living out how God has designed us...and if we really want to live out how God has designed us, we need to embrace how He created us. To personally embrace our quirks, our sweet side, the fun parts, our charisma, whether we are passionate, feisty, bubbly, outgoing or shy, or quiet and reserved. [We need] to embrace our passions...the things that spark life, a passion that burns from deep within us."

So why is this so hard to do?

I think it's because we compare ourselves to others. In today's world, comparison seems inevitable. From social media to everyday conversations, we often find ourselves measuring our worth against the talents, accomplishments, possessions, or appearances of others. Often comparison leaves us with the thought: "I'm not enough." Sometimes we may have the equally harmful thought: "I'm better than.."

"When we compare, we try to live someone else's design and purpose. And the thing about comparison is that it steals our joy...and our unique, God-given purpose." -Pastor Shawna Schwaninger

When we compare ourselves to others, we risk losing sight of God's plan for our lives and giving into our insecurity or our vanity.

After I graduated from college I spent a year in South Africa studying at the University of Cape Town on a Rotary Scholarship. When I came back to the

States I was struggling with what to do next, I thought I might want to teach but had this feeling like it wasn't big enough. After all, two of my roommates from college were in med school and one was in law school. When I finally said something to my mom about wanting to teach she basically said "took you long enough...you've been teaching your whole life." She could see God's plan for me more clearly than I could because I was comparing myself to my friends. I was trying to live someone else's design and purpose.

So how do we avoid losing sight of God's plan?

As Christians, our true worth and identity are found in our relationship with God. As Paul tells us "It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for." We need to focus our hearts and minds on who God says we are, so that His voice becomes louder than ours, louder than the outside world..

God's perspective on us is radically different from the world's. He sees beyond outward appearances and worldly achievements; He looks at our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7). God values our faithfulness, humility, and love for Him and others far more than any external measure of success. He values all the quirks that he gave us.

As adults I think we need to be reminded to take cue from the kids and embrace the unique purpose and gifts God has given each of us. Just as every part of the body has its own function (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), each of us plays a vital role in God's kingdom. Whether we excel in singing, teaching,

bracelet making, building, or laughing, cooking, painting or teaching, we are all valuable in God's sight. We are all "part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone."

I want to leave you with a passage from the writer Aru Barzak

"The God who made the stars, the seas, the mountains and its peaks, the universe and its galaxies felt this world would be incomplete without you and without me. Do you see how you are a puzzle piece in the whole—how without you here, there would be a hole? Your body is not just a clay tent that you live in, it's a piece of the universe you have been given...You are not just star dust and dirt, you are a reflection of God's beauty on Earth."