



CENTER FOR STEWARDSHIP

God's Story: The Economy of Salvation and Election

INTRODUCTION

It is called many things: the purpose of life, one's *raison d'être*, the meaning of life, the point of it all. Acknowledged or not, everyone must arrive at some answer to the question—without an answer, life collapses into emptiness and futility.

What are some of the ways that people answer the question about the purpose of life? Why does it matter what answer one gives to the question? How many “right” answers are possible?

In today's world, it is commonly accepted that finding meaning in life is a subjective and individualistic problem. People are reluctant to suggest or even to consider the possibility that there might be a universally true answer to the question. But if we confess the reality of God who created the entire universe according to his plan and conforming to his will, then the question of meaning and purpose is forever removed from the realm of mere possibility or preference. Creatures do not create their own reason for being; they derive it from their Creator, and they thrive when they live according to the Creator's will. This sense of being passive before God and the recipient of God's grace is a central component of Christian faith. Of course, this truth is precisely what we seek to confess when we speak of justification by grace through faith alone. Martin Luther taught us well to rejoice in the wonder of salvation apart from doing good works. But Luther went further, and urged us to delight in the awareness of our absolute dependence on God for everything in daily life as well. So, it is that we only know the meaning and purpose of life when we know what God has to say about it. We must listen to God's word and will, and embrace his truth.

The Bible is the account of God's work in and for the world for the sake of the world. Beginning with creation,

and then moving through the story of God's activity to reclaim and redeem his rebellious creatures, it culminates in the glorious completion of the plan at the last day. From a biblical viewpoint, the world itself has a purpose, and so all the creatures in the world have a given purpose within God's plan. Knowing and embracing God's plan is an essential aspect of getting a right understanding of stewardship. For now, though, it is enough that we give a little more thought to the idea of the economy of salvation and the significance of election within that plan.

Admittedly, economy and election are not words that typically play a central role in a consideration of Christian discipleship and stewardship. However, there are foundational and critical ideas behind each word that must be appreciated to give a foundation to the study ahead. In the world of theology, economy harkens back to its most basic meaning: “a household law”; it is the order or arrangement of things that makes a household or business work. It is the word that St. Paul chooses when he talks about God's grand, sweeping plan for the whole of creation. Election is a more familiar theological term, but one with many unfortunate negative associations. It simply describes the reality of God's choice of those who are his people. Justification by grace through faith means that God does it all—he even does the initial choosing and the giving of faith. He does it all. We are God's, we are Christian, because God determined that we would be Christian.

Paul emphasizes both of these truths in a remarkable outpouring of praise and dense theology in Ephesians chapter one. It is not the easiest section of the Bible to understand, but it is beautifully comforting and essential to a right understanding of the Christian life.

Q & A

Read Ephesians chapter one and then consider and discuss the following:

- 1 Notice the careful way that Paul introduces himself to the Ephesians. What message does he send about his own self-understanding in relation to God?
- 2 Paul calls his readers “saints . . . faithful in Christ Jesus.” If being a saint is God’s work, then what does it mean to be faithful? What does faithfulness look like in the church today?
- 3 Verses 3–6 begin and end with Paul’s praise of God. What is prompting his exuberant praise? According to these verses, why do you have the gift of faith and salvation? Contemplate for a moment the idea that before the foundation of the universe, you were chosen to be God’s adopted child . . . relate some of your thoughts to the rest of the group.
- 4 In verses 7–10, Paul describes the concrete actions that God took to accomplish his plan of adopting his sons through Christ. Reading verse 8 in light of verse 7, what is the “mystery of his will” that has been made known? How is this a “suitable administration” (economy)?
- 5 In the next section of verses, Paul alternates between passages of breathless praise and foundational doctrinal formulations. What does this teach about the relationship between “worship” and “the study of doctrine”?
- 6 What is the “sealing” Paul mentions in verse 13? How does this truth affect the way we think about our life in this world?
- 7 In verse 17, Paul uses the phrase, “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ”. What do you think of this way of speaking? What might it teach us about our own Christian life?
- 8 Starting with verse 18, Paul lists four gifts of God’s grace: “the hope of his calling . . . the glory of his inheritance . . . the greatness of his power . . . the strength of his might.” How are all of these related and brought together on Good Friday, Easter, and Ascension?
- 9 Finally, in the last two verses, Paul connects the Father’s work in Christ to us, the church. All that has happened in Christ is for the sake of Christ’s body—the church. How does recognizing your place within the body of Christ, and thence within the economy of salvation, affect how you think about the meaning and purpose of life?
- 10 How will a fuller understanding of the economy of salvation and your own election make a difference in the way that you live in the days ahead?

PRAYER

In your closing prayer, join Paul in praising God for the plan of salvation and for your part in the plan through his choosing. Seek his direction on your application of his truth to your living.