



# WHAT WAS GOD THINKING ABOUT WHAT GOD WOULD DO?

## EPHESIANS 1:3-14 (1)

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JUNE 22, 2025

People often ask questions about Christianity that are more than a little challenging. For example, I can't count the number of times I've been asked, "What about the heathen in Africa?" Perhaps a more pressing question would be, "What about the heathen in America?" Then, of course, there are all sorts of questions about the problem of evil. Then you have questions such as: "Why are there so many denominations?" and "Why is there only one way to be reconciled to God?" and "Where did Cain get his wife?"

But there is one more question that the apostle Paul answers here in Ephesians 1:3-14. It goes something like this: *"What was God doing before Genesis 1:1? Before there was a single molecule in existence, before two atoms had collided, before Adam and Eve took their first breath, what was God doing? What occupied his life? What was he thinking?"* A related question that is also answered in these verses is, "What was God's *purpose* in creating the universe and mankind? What is it that he intended to accomplish?" Had Paul not written these verses we might still be asking those questions, leaving us fumbling around trying to make sense of a profound mystery.

I want us to pause momentarily and let the reality of what Paul is saying sink into our souls. It is beyond breathtaking. What we are reading here is *an inspired portrayal of the mind and purposes of God*. Paul is inviting us into a place where none of us would dare go were it not for the fact that he wrote this in Scripture. It is as if Paul says, "Come crawl with me inside the mind of the triune God. I want to describe for you what he was thinking and the plans he was forming before anything other than God ever existed."

I tremble when I approach this passage and try to explain it. We are truly treading on holy ground. Rarely in Scripture are we invited not simply into the presence of God, but into his heart and mind. Do you fully realize what God did in revealing this to Paul, and what Paul is, in turn, revealing to us? We often say to a person, "A penny for your thoughts." God doesn't so much as charge us a penny to disclose his thoughts. He simply asks us to reflect on what he revealed to the apostle Paul.

I'm not trying to be overly dramatic. In fact, I don't believe it is possible to be overly dramatic in this case. And yet, I tremble as I try to make sense of what Paul is saying. One of the more precious things God can do for his children is to unveil to us how he put in place an immutable plan for adopting us into his family. Of all the things that I might mess up, the last and most devastating thing would be to misunderstand and misinterpret what God has so graciously revealed to you and me through Paul's words.

When it comes to God's saving purpose, we often ask a number of questions, such as: who, what, when, and how. But today we look at the **WHY**. God is speaking to you and me and saying in crystal clear terms, over and over again, this is the **ULTIMATE** reason why I have saved you from a well-deserved hell. Think closely with me about what it means to speak of an **ULTIMATE** reason or goal or aim. I might ask you, Why did you go outside? Your answer: To get in my car. Why did you get in your car? Your answer: to drive to the restaurant. Why did you drive to the restaurant? Your answer; To eat dinner. Eating dinner is the **ULTIMATE** reason or goal or aim of your actions.

*So, what was God's **ULTIMATE** reason or goal or aim in blessing us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places?* Paul speaks of "divine election" (v. 4). He also says that God "predestined" us for adoption (v. 5). He also speaks of our "redemption" (v. 7) and the "forgiveness of our trespasses" (v. 7). That isn't all. In v. 11 he speaks of our "inheritance" and of being "sealed with the promised Holy Spirit" (v. 13). But **WHY DID GOD DO THIS? WHAT WAS HIS ULTIMATE AIM?**

Let me ask the question a different way. **Why** did God create the world? **Why** did he choose some for eternal life while leaving others in the sinful state they have chosen for themselves? **Why** did he predestine us to adoption into his family? **Why** did he redeem us and forgive us and grant us this glorious inheritance? **Why?** And how does God's purpose in all this serve to demonstrate his love for us?

### *A Few Introductory Issues in Ephesians 1:3-14*

Before I answer that question, a few observations about this remarkable paragraph are in order. Ephesians 1:3-14 may well be the single most important passage in the entire Bible on the cause and nature of our salvation. We will spend at least three Sundays unpacking it.

- The first thing to note is that vv. 3-14 is one long sentence in the Greek text: 202 words! If you had ever written an essay in your high school English class that contained a sentence with 202 words, I'm quite certain your English teacher would have given you an F. Ideas and principles and exclamations of praise come tumbling out of Paul's mouth "in a continuous cascade" (Stott, 32) with such joy and intensity that he dared not pause to take a breath, much less end it with a period! There are other lengthy sentences in Ephesians (1:15-23; 2:1-7; 3:2-13; 3:14-19; 4:1-6; 4:11-16; 6:14-20), but none can compare with this one.
- One cannot help but note the *Trinitarian* structure of his praise: Father (vv. 4-6), Son (vv. 7-12), and Spirit (vv.13-14) are together united in the work of salvation. The origin and source of these spiritual blessings is God the Father. The sphere within which as well as the means by which these blessings are experienced is God the Son. And it is the Spirit who "stamps his character on every blessing" (O'Brien, 92). The Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University released the latest installment of its American Worldview Inventory series which documents Americans' views on the Trinity. The research is based on responses collected from 2,100 adults in January. Belief in the Trinity, characterized by the Cultural Research Center as a "fundamental tenet of Christianity," increases to 16% among self-identified Christians, 24% among theologically-identified born-again Christians. That means that among the so-called theologically informed, professing believers, 3 out of 4 don't believe in the Trinity.
- Note also the repeated emphasis on *the divine initiative* in salvation as seen in the vocabulary related to God's will or purpose or plan: "according to the purpose of *his will*" (v. 5), "the mystery of *his will*" (v. 9), "according to *his purpose*" (v. 9), "according to the *purpose*" (v. 11), "the *counsel of his will*" (v. 11). Indeed, no fewer than 11x in these verses do we find vocabulary reflective of divine sovereignty: he *elected* us (v. 4), he *predestined* us (v. 5), his *good pleasure* (v. 5), God's *will* (v. 5), God's *will* (v. 9), his *good pleasure* (v. 9), his *purpose* (v. 9), he *foreordained* us (v. 11), his *purpose* (v. 11), his *counsel* (v. 11), his *will* (v. 11).
- There is also a distinct emphasis on God's grace (how appropriate, then, to speak of *sovereign grace*!). No fewer than 5x is grace mentioned: grace comes to us from God and Jesus Christ (v. 2), the glory of God's grace is to be praised (v. 6), God's grace has been lavished on us in Jesus (v. 6), God's grace is not poor or limited but rich, which accounts for the forgiveness of our sins (v. 7), and God's grace abounds to us (v. 8).
- We see also that three perspectives on time appear: God's activity in eternity *past* when he chose and predestined us ("before the foundation of the world," v. 4; cf. vv. 9,11); God's activity in *present* history in Christ and in those who believe (vv. 6-8, 11-14); and God's activity in the *future*, at the close of history when all is summed up in Christ (v. 10).
- Observe the centrality of Jesus Christ: in the first 14 verses of this letter the name or title "Christ" (or its equivalent or a personal pronoun) occurs **15x**!
- Observe the repeated use (no fewer than **11x** in 1:1-14) of the phrase "in Christ" or "in him" or their equivalents.

But we still must answer the question: Why? It is this final point that I want to focus on today.

### *God's Ultimate Motive in Creating Us and Saving Us*

Why did God plan and orchestrate human history the way he did? Why did he elect some hell-deserving sinners to be saved, adopted, and united by faith in Jesus? Paul clearly states God's motivation or his purpose in all these things four times in chapters 1-2.

**1:6 – to the praise of his glorious grace**

**1:12 – to the praise of his glory**

**1:14 – to the praise of his glory**

**2:7 – to show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness**

So, why has he done it this way? Why does God pursue his own praise? Why does he make his own glory the primary reason for all that he does? My answer is one that may disturb you at first, but I simply ask that you not listen to me but to the Scriptures. What they consistently declare is that *the pre-eminent passion in God's heart is his own glory. God is at the center of his own affections. The supreme love of God's life is God. God is pre-eminently committed to the fame of his name. God is himself the end for which God created the world. Better, still, God's immediate goal in all he does is his own glory.*

God relentlessly and unceasingly creates, rules, orders, directs, speaks, judges, saves, destroys and delivers in order to make known who he is and to secure from the whole of the universe the praise, honor and glory of which he and he alone is ultimately and infinitely worthy. There are more than 200 texts of Scripture that in various ways make this clearly known. Here I will cite only a fraction of those many verses.

1 Sam. 12:22 - "For the Lord will not forsake his people *for his great name's sake*, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself."

Ps. 23:3 - "He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness *for his name's sake*."

Ps. 25:11 - "*For your name's sake*, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great."

Ps. 31:3 - "For you are my rock and my fortress; *and for your name's sake* you lead me and guide me."

Ps. 79:9 (cf. Isa. 44:23) - "Help us, O God of our salvation, *for the glory of your name*; deliver us, and atone for our sins, *for your name's sake*."

Ps. 109:21 - "But you, O God my Lord, deal on my behalf *for your name's sake*, because your steadfast love is good, deliver me!"

Isa. 43:6-7 - "I will say to the north, 'Give up!' And to the south, 'Do not withhold;' Bring my sons from afar, and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, *whom I created for my glory*, whom I formed and made."

Isa. 48:9, 11 - "*For my name's sake I defer my anger; for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. . . For my own sake, for my own sake*, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another."

Isa. 60:21 - "Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, *that I might be glorified*."

Isa. 61:3 - "to grant those who mourn in Zion, to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, *that he may be glorified*."

Jer. 13:11 - "For as the loincloth clings to the waste of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, declares the Lord, *that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory*, but they would not listen."

Jer. 14:7 - "Though our iniquities testify against us, act, O Lord *for your name's sake*."

1 Jn. 2:12 - "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven *for his name's sake*."

As I said, there are in addition to these, some 200 other biblical texts that say the same thing. You might get the impression that this is important to God and thus should be important to us as well.

"But Sam, isn't that terribly selfish of him?" Many Christians would push back and insist that the ultimate motive behind all that God does is our joy, our good, and our satisfaction.

But could it be that *both* of these statements are true? *Could it be that when God seeks his own glory first and foremost, he is simultaneously seeking our highest good and satisfaction?* But how can that be? These two ideas appear to be mutually exclusive. They strike us as contradictory. Either God is for himself and his good or he is for us and our good. Right? Wrong! Let me explain.

Who or what is the best and most beautiful and most glorious thing in the universe? The answer, of course, is God. He is supremely wonderful, majestic, powerful, kind, gracious, and exalted. There is nothing better or more satisfying than God himself.

If that is true, and I trust that all Christians will agree that it is, the greatest and most loving thing that God could ever do is to *give* us himself, *show* us himself, *fill* us with himself so that we might behold him and enjoy him and rest in him and find consummate satisfaction in him.

I love books and baseball and good food. But all these, and everything else, have a limited capacity to bring me consummate joy and deep, durable delight that can sustain me through hard times. If God is going to love me supremely, he can't stop with giving me these gifts or any number of other earthly gifts. If God is to love me supremely, he must satisfy my heart with the most satisfying, most enthralling, most beautiful thing in the universe. And that "thing" is, of course, God himself. No matter how much happiness the greatest of earthly joys can bring to me, nothing can compare with the "joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8) that God has chosen to impart to me and to all who believe him.

But it doesn't stop with the gift to us of God himself. That's where it begins but not where it ends. Perhaps an illustration or two will make my point clearer.

When we encounter something in life that is beautiful and glorious and powerful, something that fills us with joy and deep satisfaction, we find in our hearts an irresistible urge to tell others about it. I've explained on several occasions the impact on me of Pierre Auguste Renoir's painting, *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. I've urged everyone to gaze upon it. When it is not traveling around the world to be shown at numerous art museums, it is housed at the Philips Museum in Washington, D.C.

Whenever you go to a movie that captivates your mind and imagination, or whenever you eat at an exquisite restaurant, or whenever you finish reading a scintillating novel, or whenever you see a glorious sunset, your first instinct is to share this with others and invite them to join you in your joy. "You've got to see this," we shout aloud. "There's nothing as beautiful." Or, "Please read this book. It is marvelous and you will miss out on a wonderful and captivating story if you don't." Or, "You've got to see the game-winning touchdown in the Super Bowl. I've never witnessed anything like it!"

What I'm suggesting is that whatever joy or delight or satisfaction you experience from anything in this world, ***that joy, delight, and satisfaction is stunted and limited and incomplete until you praise it and share it with others and invite them to join you in your happiness.*** It is almost painful to witness a rainbow or a sunset or the Grand Canyon and not be able to share that with another person.

***What I'm suggesting is that the joy in your heart is incomplete and suppressed and stunted until you give expression to it in praise.*** There is an urge in the human heart that demands we proclaim to others the delight we experience and to invite them to experience it for themselves.

"Oh! Wow! Did you see that play?" "Gracious, sake's alive, did you hear that fantastic piano concerto she played?" "Unbelievable! You've simply got to taste this dessert they prepared." Even if there is no one around to share the experience with you, your happiness and satisfaction, and unparalleled delight compel you to say it, shout it, share it, and proclaim it, and it's indescribably frustrating if you are prevented from doing so.

Now, how does all this relate to God and to us? I begin with a question. Who or what is the most splendid, the most glorious, and incomparable being in the universe? Who or what can do what no one else can do to bring you into the greatest experience of joy and satisfaction and freedom and happiness and fulfillment? I trust that your answer is, God!

And that is what God has done in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He has done everything necessary to give himself to you and in doing so to satisfy your soul's deepest and most intense longings. As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:18, "For Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God." The greatest gift of grace secured for us by Jesus isn't the forgiveness of sins or justification or being adopted as a child of God or redemption or even the promise of eternal life. ***The greatest gift of God's grace to us is God himself!***

Now, there's one final step in this great truth. If our joy and satisfaction and hope and delight in God is never expressed in praise and adoration and worship of him, it fails to attain its consummate goal. God obviously knows this. And that is why he repeatedly tells us in Scripture to declare his worth and to make known his greatness and to worship him and no other. In doing so, he brings our joy and satisfaction in him to its highest and most intense expression.

That being true, to say that God does all things for his own glory, on the one hand, and to say he loves us supremely and desires our ultimate good, on the other, is not a contradiction. Why? ***Because it is in our satisfaction in him that he is most glorified in us.*** To seek his own praise and to love us to the greatest degree possible are not two separate, contradictory, motives in the heart of God. As John Piper has said over and over again, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him." Or again, his glory in us is found in our gladness in him. Therefore, the most loving and kind and gracious and merciful thing that God can do for you and me is to seek from us the praise of his own glory above all else.

After all, what greater gift can God give us beyond himself? It's not a new car or computer or five-bedroom house overlooking the lake. The greatest gift he can give us, and in doing so demonstrate his love for us, is himself. To know God, to see God, to be found in God, to behold his face, to live in his presence, to experience firsthand and deeply in our hearts the majesty of all that is God, is the way he loves us. ***And that love finds its consummation in our praise of him for giving us himself.***

I realize it sounds odd when you first hear it, but here is the simple and yet immensely profound truth: for God to seek his own glory and to seek your good are not separate or mutually exclusive. Your greatest good is found precisely in the enjoyment and declaration of his glory. To make it sound even more outrageous, ***God is the one being in the universe for whom self-seeking is the most loving thing he can do!***

Were God not to pursue and require the praise of himself above all else, we are the ones who stand to lose the most. For it would mean that we suffer the loss of the greatest and most majestic and most satisfying experience possible, namely, knowing and enjoying God.

If God were to come to each of us and say something like, "Here, take all the money in the world," or, "I will orchestrate it so that everyone else will speak highly of you and respect you," or, "I promise never to allow you to suffer any form of illness," or, "I will ensure that your favorite sports team will always win the championship every year," you might feel grateful. But I would argue that there would be a craving or desire in the depths of your soul that remains unfulfilled even if God should do all these things for you. The reason is that all these things that you and I think are essential for our happiness are temporary. They won't last. They all come to an end. They all have a limited capacity to answer the cry of the human heart. Only God can answer that cry, and he does it by giving himself to us when all we deserve is damnation.

So, when we read here in Ephesians 1:3-14 and elsewhere in the Bible that God has graciously chosen us in eternity past and has adopted us as his beloved children and has forgiven us all our sins, we can truly say that he was acting on behalf of his own glory ***and also*** on behalf of our good. That would only be false if there is something or someone in the universe who can do for us what God can't, if there is something or someone who can enthrall us and captivate us and exhilarate us and satisfy our soul's deepest longing better and more completely than God can. But there isn't any such someone or something.

No human being can say or do this. I would never tell you that when you come on a Sunday your ultimate goal should be to love me, praise me, or worship me. I would never suggest that the primary reason why I'm preaching this sermon is to gain praise and honor and adoration for myself. Why? Because I'm not God! I'm not worthy of any of your adoration. Only God is.

God's goal in all he does is to receive praise for the glory of his name. And lest we think that this is only an Old Testament emphasis, let's revisit Ephesians 1:3-14 one more time. There is a phrase repeated three times in verses 6, 12, and 14 which makes it very clear what Paul thinks is the goal of God in saving us from sin and for himself.

Notice first vv. 5-6 - He predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ***to the praise of his glorious grace.***

Then verse 12 - "So that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be ***to the praise of his glory.***"

Then again in verse 14 - The Holy Spirit "is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, ***to the praise of his glory.***"

Finally, in chapter 2, v. 7 - ***to show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness***

From the past eternal decrees of God in predestination to the future eternal enjoyment of our inheritance in the age to come, God's goal and purpose has been that his glory be praised, especially the glory of his grace.

He governs the world precisely to the end that he might be admired, marveled at, exalted, and praised. Christ is coming, Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 1:10, at the end of this age, "**to be glorified** in his saints and to be marveled at by all who believe."

But wait a minute. 1 Corinthians 13:5 says, "Love seeks not its own." If the Scriptures plainly teach that God makes it his ultimate goal to be glorified and praised, how then can he be loving? For "love seeks not its own." But note well: this verse speaks of human love, especially in our relationships with each other. I want to suggest to you that in seeking his glory and praise ultimately, he is simultaneously seeking your good and joy.

"What could God give us to enjoy that would show him most loving? There is only one possible answer, isn't there? Himself! If God would give us the best, the most satisfying, that is, if he would love us perfectly, he must offer us no less than himself for our contemplation and fellowship" (Piper).

My life verse is Psalm 16:11, where the psalmist says, "In your presence there is fullness of joy, at your right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Psalm 16:11). You and I can find "joy" in a lot of things: good health, money, prestige, a comfortable home, a loving spouse and obedient children. But there is no guarantee that these things that have the potential to bring us joy will always do so. And whatever degree of joy they might bring us is considerably less than what God can impart. There is "fullness" of joy in God's presence, not partial joy or incomplete joy or momentary joy or half-hearted joy.

We find "pleasure" in a lot of things, don't we? But do they last forevermore? No. They come and go. They rise and fall. They increase and decrease. They fascinate us and then bore us. Only the pleasures that God gives us last for eternity!

With the help of C.S. Lewis I learned not only that we praise what we enjoy but that **the praise is the climax of the joy itself**. Without it, joy is incomplete. Praise and adoration of God is not tacked on later; it is part of the pleasure. Listen to the way Lewis describes this insight from his book on Psalms:

"But the most obvious fact about praise — whether of God or anything — strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless (sometimes even if) shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise — lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game — praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians and scholars. My whole, more general difficulty, about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are, the delight is incomplete till it is expressed" (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 93–95)

There's the key: we praise what we enjoy because the delight is incomplete until it is expressed in praise. If we were not allowed to speak of what we value and celebrate what we love and praise what we admire, our joy would not be full. Therefore, if God is truly for us, if he would give us the best and make our joy full, he must make it his aim to win our praise for himself — not because he needs to shore up some weakness in himself or compensate for some deficiency, but because he loves us and seeks the fullness of our joy that can only be found in knowing and praising him, the most beautiful of all beings.

So, in conclusion, let me say it once again: **God is the one being in all the universe for whom seeking his own praise is the ultimately loving act**. For him, self-exaltation is the highest virtue. When he does all things "for the praise of his glory" as Ephesians 1 says, he preserves for us and offers to us the only thing in all the world which can satisfy our longings. God is for us, and therefore has been, is now, and always will be, for himself. Praise the Lord! Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.