

• *For further study*, see Eph. 1:14; 4:30; Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 6:20; Col. 1:14; also Matt. 26:28; Mark 10:45; Hebrews 9:11-12, 26; 1 Peter 1:18-19.

11 In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory.

"We, who...put our hope in Christ" — the balance to being chosen and predestined. Paul goes on to speak, not of the world as a whole, but of those who respond to God's call.

SUMMARY Paul writes a waterfall of praise in possibly the longest sentence in the Bible, giving thanks for the immensity of the spiritual blessings we have in Christ: being forgiven, made holy, redeemed and adopted, given the status of sonship and allowed insight into the mystery of God's will. These are all facets of what it means to receive salvation, the biggest, most-life transforming event that any of us can experience. And Paul makes it crystal clear that this is God's gracious gift to us: "God chose us in Him", as a work of grace "which He has freely given us" "in Him we were chosen" and "included in Christ". We also have a vital part – hearing and believing "the message of truth". Put simply, we hear the Good News, receive it – and the Holy Spirit comes into our human spirit, and we can now see how we belong to heaven.

APPLICATION Some churches regularly celebrate people coming to Christ in salvation and becoming Christians. Others hardly mention it, if at all. Guess which ones are attracting and growing. Alpha Course online registrations doubled during the lockdown. People are seeking Jesus and finding salvation in Him, and this is cause for the highest praise.

QUESTION *Does your church proclaim, and celebrate, salvation through people choosing to turn to trust Jesus? What are you doing to encourage that?*

PRAYER Father in heaven, in this season when we especially celebrate Your drawing near to us and entering our lives and neighbourhoods through Your Son Jesus, we pray for revival, with many finding Him.

May this present time of extreme difficulty be a wake-up call to all of us, to look to You in Your goodness, compassion and power and see Your work of salvation with new eyes.

Enable us to see how we can join You in this, Your work. To the glory of Jesus, Amen.

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13-14 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of His glory.

"And you also were included" — most of Paul's readers would have been Gentile.

"Marked in Him with a seal" — like a signature on a contract, the Holy Spirit in a believer's life is God's 'signature' that can be seen by others to show God's ownership.

The Living Word

Bible readings for January 3, 2020, with explanatory notes

www.thelivingword.uk PRINT EDITION

Bible study on the common lectionary readings for **Christmas, January 3**
Prepare by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on the pulpit teaching

Theme: **How the Lord saves**

Jeremiah 31:7-14 – The Lord saves His people from their exile

John 1:10-18 – Receive Jesus to become a child of God

Ephesians 1:3-14 – Praise God for spiritual blessings in Christ

Also read: Psalm 147:12-20

Jeremiah 31:7-14 – The Lord saves His people from their exile

They will return in repentant sorrow but will find God-given prosperity again

7 This is what the Lord says: "Sing with joy for Jacob; shout for the foremost of the nations. Make your praises heard, and say, 'Lord, save your people, the remnant of Israel.'

"Foremost of the nations" — when the Lord saves them. The word "save" is the basis of Hosanna, the 'Palm Sunday' cry of the people acclaiming Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

8 "See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labour; a great throng will return.

"Land of the north" — Assyria and Babylon. The Lord is promising to bring back the exiles from wherever they are without overlooking the weak and helpless.

"Great throng" — nearly 50,000 returned in 538-536 BC, Ezra 2:64-65.

9 "They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is My firstborn son.

"Come with weeping" — echoes of the Songs of Ascents, Ps. 120-134, in this verse, esp. Psalm 126 where those who "return", v.8 "with weeping", v.9 that is symbolic of repentance, find gladness in the Lord bringing them back, to their land and to Him. Also v.13 below.

"Israel's father" — the idea of God as Father was not unknown in the OT but it did not take on the significance we know before Jesus' teaching on fatherhood.

10 "Hear the word of the Lord, you nations; proclaim it in distant coastlands: 'He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.'

"Distant coastlands" — remote area to the west.

11 "For the Lord will deliver Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.

"They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord – the grain, the new wine and the olive oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more.

"The bounty of the Lord" — a picture of God-given prosperity as the people flourish again.

• *For further study on the joyful return, Isaiah 35:10, 51:10-11.*

13 "Then young women will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.

14 "I will satisfy the priests with abundance, and my people will be filled with my bounty," declares the Lord.

"Satisfy the priests with abundance" — the people support their priests with tithes from their prosperity.

SUMMARY A picture of the people of God restored. Worship was central to the covenant, and the covenant was central to the kingdom established by King David. But it did not last. The monarchy grew independent of God, worship of idol deities increased, God's protection was withdrawn, and first the northern kingdom fell to Assyria, then Judah fell to the Babylonians. However God's purpose has always been salvation, and the beginnings of the resettlement are foretold here by Jeremiah.

APPLICATION Things can go wrong in life – and the spiritual life of the nation. Here we are reminded that God always has a plan of salvation, to call people back to Him, and to hope.

QUESTION *What does this passage tell us about God's plan of salvation for the present crisis time?*

John 1:10-18 – Receive Jesus to become a child of God

Believing and receiving the Word who became flesh leads to new spiritual birth
10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognise Him.

"In the world" — John uses the word "world" more than a hundred times to mean the earth and the people, or the human system opposed to God, or both.

11-13 He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His Name, He gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

"His own" — firstly (neuter) His own home or domain, the Jewish nation and heritage, and second time (masculine) the Jewish people.

"He gave the right to become children of God" — when someone receives and believes in Jesus for the free gift of eternal life, they undergo a supernatural birth, the impartation of spiritual life. They are "born... of God" — a transformation Jesus called being "born again", John 3:3.

14 The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

"The Word became flesh" — a staggering truth in just four words, stating that God became human. Jesus took on flesh ("incarnation") without ceasing to be God (see Phil. 2:6-7). In v.18 (below) His deity is also made clear.

"Made his dwelling" — lit. *skēnoō*, pitched his tent among us. This Greek word recalls the OT Tabernacle which was the place of God's earthly presence among the tribes.

"We have seen His glory" — the Father's glory in the Tabernacle was now present in the person of Jesus Christ.

• *For further study, see Exodus 40:34-38; John 2:11, 12:23-28, 41, 17:1-5.*

15-16 (John testified concerning Him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me.'") Out of His fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.

"Before me" — in rank, and also time. Jesus was born after John the Baptist but His existence was from eternity past.

"Out of His fullness... grace in place of grace" — the gospel does what the law could not do. Through knowing Jesus we have access to the unmerited, unlimited favour of God.

17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

"Law given through Moses" — in this Old Covenant era God's truth and grace were revealed in the law received by Moses, and through him (and the Aaronic priesthood) to others. In the new covenant, grace and truth are embodied in Jesus, God in the flesh. Knowing Him is knowing His grace and truth, and we know Him ourselves, without a mediator.

• *For further study, read Romans 7:1-8:4.*

18 No one has ever seen God, but the

one and only Son, who is Himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made Him known.

SUMMARY The Son of God was involved in the creation of the world and, by inference, was present when the law was revealed to Moses. No one could see God, although Moses came close. He was given laws to teach the people about God's truth and grace. But now the Son of God, the Word, has become human and approachable and has moved into our neighbourhood. We don't need to approach God's truth and grace through an intermediary – Jesus has it all. As we open our hearts to Him, it is imparted to us as a new identity, born again spiritually as children of God, no less.

APPLICATION Jesus, who gave His sinless life for us, asks us to give Him our lives – or at least, the lordship of them. What could be simpler? Yet we often prefer to work at it in other ways, while Jesus, who is near and approachable, waits for us to ask Him in.

QUESTION *If a friend or neighbour asked for a simple explanation about Jesus coming, as we especially celebrate this time of year, what would you tell them?*

Ephesians 1:3-14 – Praise God for spiritual blessings in Christ

When we chose to put our hope in Christ, He chose us to receive adoption rights

3-4 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight.

"Blessed us in the spiritual realms" — the blessings of life in Christ are primarily spiritual, and may come through to influence the material and physical as we pray and exercise faith. Spiritual blessings are all aspects of God's salvation of us.

"He chose us in Him" — emphasises that our salvation depends entirely on God, with no religious or other 'good conduct' making us deserving. By His sovereign initiative, God embraces and blesses as His children those who trust in Christ.

"To be holy and blameless in His sight" — God's choice of us is linked to our choice to receive Jesus as Saviour and Lord, whereupon "in Him" we are seen as if we had never sinned. We choose whether or not to come to God through Jesus; but this decision was known in heaven beforehand.

5-6 In love He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will –

"No one has ever seen God" — although some were permitted to see something of God revealing Himself, Exodus 24:9-10, even Moses could not see His face, Exodus 33:20-23.

to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves.

"Predestined us" — God's plan and destiny for those redeemed by Jesus, underlining that this is God's work and not our doing. This should not be distorted into a fatalism that includes some and excludes others. These words were written by perhaps the greatest and most courageous practitioner of Christian mission!

7-10 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

"Redemption through His blood" — in the ancient world, slaves could be freed or bought back by paying a ransom. Our slavery is a bondage to the control of sin. The OT and NT clearly teach there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood, a powerful symbol of death and sacrifice. This is the ransom price Christ paid for us.