

“If”

Ephesians 1:1-14

2 in our series on Paul's letter to the Ephesians

September 9, 2012

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Message

Last week we began preaching from the book of Ephesians, and at the end of the message I told you about Jarek. Eighteen years ago, four-year-old Jarek showed up at church with his mother Janielle and without a father. And Jarek just couldn't keep still. I remember thinking at the time, "That kid is so cute, but he's just looking for trouble."

Before long Janielle started dating Andy, but Jarek still couldn't sit still. I can't know, but I think Jarek felt this: "I don't have a Daddy, and everybody knows. Andy isn't my Daddy." Andy was white, Janielle was white, and Jarek was a beautiful, chocolate brown.

Andy and Janielle eventually decided to marry, and I performed the ceremony. Last week I told you what happened as they made that covenant. Jarek was the ring bearer. He made it down the aisle as planned, but then he just couldn't keep still. Within a few minutes, someone else was holding the ring, and Jarek was placed under house arrest in the front row between two relatives with strong arms. He was squirming on the outside and the inside.

I think we're all just like Jarek, squirming in church, wondering if we have a Daddy and if He loves us and if everyone notices we don't look the same.

Well, Andy had just finished reciting his vows to Janielle. I was starting the ring ceremony, and Jarek was causing trouble, when suddenly Andy stopped me. He turned around in front of everybody, fixed his gaze on Jarek, and said, "Jarek, I love you with all my heart. I will always be your Daddy, and you will always be my son." And that was the first time I ever saw Jarek sit still. He sat still the rest of the service.

That's the power of the blessing.

A week ago Thursday, Andy e-mailed from Minnesota saying, "Peter, Jarek's doing well. He just started his first week at West Point Academy." And I bet his heart looks a lot like Andy's—the image of Andy's.

"God the Father has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." That was last week's message.

This week I'd like you to imagine, "What if?" What if Andy said "if"? He didn't, but what if? What if Andy loved Jarek *less*? What if Andy got scared of the implications of his covenant vow to Jarek? Because, you know, unconditional covenants of love can get you crucified.

What if Andy didn't really care about Jarek's heart but really only cared that Jarek stop squirming in church? What if someone else was delivering the message to Andy and didn't love Jarek but just wanted to control Jarek, and the Church? What if Andy said, "Jarek, I love you with all my heart *if* you choose to do what I command. But if you don't, I'll hate you with a perfect and unending hatred."

Or...

“Jarek, I will always be your Daddy, *if* you choose to always come to meetings where people ritually reenact my sacrifice of love for you. But if you don’t, I’ll torment you forever without end.”

Or...

“Jarek, I love you with all my heart, and I will always be your Daddy, *if* you choose to believe that I love you with all my heart and will always be your Daddy, and *if* you choose to confess that you are entirely unworthy. But if you don’t confess and don’t believe I love you unconditionally, then I’ll hate you forever. No matter how you cry, there will be no mercy.

Or...

What if Andy got more sophisticated and said, “Jarek, I love some children with all my heart, and I will always be their Daddy. And, Jarek, you *might be* one of those children. You’ll know if you are because:

- 1) You’ll fully believe that you are.
- 2) You’ll come to meetings that commemorate my love.
- 3) You’ll do good deeds that evidence faith in my love.

“But *if* you don’t, you will come to realize you are an illegitimate abomination, created to be tortured endlessly in the fires of Hell to the glory of God.”

Imagine if Andy said “if.”

Any psychologist, any doctor, any parent with half a brain will tell you that’s not how you create a child, but rather, that’s how you desecrate a child. That’s how you un-create a child. That’s how you drive a child insane and trap them in their own Hell.

“In Christ, God the Father has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” And does He say “if”?

See this picture?

[Image of Jesus holding a rifle with the caption “I love you unconditionally but if you don’t love me back I will torment you for eternity”]

Is that God’s Word to us?—Jesus holding a rifle saying, “I love you unconditionally, but if you don’t love me back, I’ll torment you for all eternity”? Is there an “if” at the end of God the Father’s blessing?

Ephesians 1:3-14 is all one sentence in Greek, the longest sentence in the Bible. Last week we focused on the first phrase, and this week we’ll focus on the second phrase. But for context we’ll read the whole thing and ask if there is an “if.”

Ephesians 1:3-14:

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, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to

the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1:3-7 says, “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, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world.” In Greek, it’s “before the foundation of the *cosmos*.”

I grew up watching stuff like this:

[Video clip with Carl Sagan speaking, soft music in the background, and pictures of landscape]: “The *cosmos* is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be. Now for the first time we have the power to decide the fate of our planet and ourselves.”

Scientifically speaking, that’s a rather misleading and ridiculous statement. For the last forty years or so, it’s become abundantly clear that the *cosmos* had a beginning. That is, space and time themselves had a beginning and are relative to things like light and *logos*. And so the *cosmos* is not an “uncaused cause,” and we are not “uncaused causes,” and that means every “if” is dependent on a foundational “if.” That means all our choices are grounded and continually dependent on another choice, the Creator’s choice, His “if.”

So, if you would, I’d like us to think for a minute about space and time, “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,” and “if.” Now, if I lose you, don’t worry. I’ll come back and get you. None of us fully understands this stuff. Actually we *can’t* understand, but I hope to help you believe.

In 1884 a pastor and schoolteacher name Edwin Abbott published a little book entitled *Flatland*. You may have seen the cartoon in geometry class in high school; I’ve referred to it in the past and may need to refer to it many times more as we look at Ephesians.

Flatland is about two-dimensional creatures that live in peace in a two-dimensional world called Flatland until one of the characters has a revelation of the third dimension and tries to explain it to the citizens of Flatland. You’ll remember that Paul, who wrote Ephesians, spoke of being “caught up into the third heaven” and hearing things he was “unable to speak.” Well, this Flatlander sees things he cannot explain, not because they are untrue but because they are *more* true than what a two-dimensional mind can comprehend. The two-dimensional mind thinks the third dimension is just a metaphor or myth, so when the Flatlander with the revelation insists, “It’s real!” he’s ruled a heretic and thrown in prison, just like Paul.

You see, if we lived in Flatland, our world, our *cosmos*, would look like this: [Peter holds a large, white board with two-dimensional circles, squares, and rectangles drawn on it.] And the only things we could perceive would be two-dimensional objects like squares and circles.

So what would we see if a three-dimensional sphere suddenly intersected our world? [Peter moves a basketball toward the circle on the board.] We’d see a miracle, a sign, or a wonder. Suddenly a dot would appear, grow into a circle, shrink, and disappear.

What would we see if a cylinder intersected our world this way? [Peter moves a can towards the rectangle drawn on the board.] A rectangle. What would we see if the same cylinder intersected our world *this* way? [Peter turns the can.] A circle. What if the guy with the revelation said, "The rectangle is the circle; what you see is two yet one"? We'd all say, "You're insane!" What if he said it's three in one?

Well, what if cylinders, cones, and spheres intersected Flatland all the time and just stayed there? We Flatlanders would be surrounded by miracles, signs, and wonders all the time and wouldn't even know it.

- We'd say stuff like, "Look, a circle." And the fellow with the revelation would say, "That's a sphere!"
- We'd say, "Look at that square over there." And he'd say, "It's not just a square; it's a cube!"
- We'd say, "Look, those men are drunk on Pentecost Sunday," and the fellow with the revelation would say, "I see eternal fire filling a temple."
- We'd say, "Look at those hippies sharing all their stuff in common." And he'd say, "I see the New Jerusalem coming down."
- We'd say, "How cute. That man is giving a cup of water to a child." And he'd say, "I see God in Christ Jesus drinking His own love."
- We'd say, "That's a lovely metaphor." The fellow from Flatland would shake his head in frustration.
- We might say, "Good Lord, I see a man naked, beaten, cursed, and nailed to a tree. It's the worst thing I've ever seen." And the man with the revelation would say, "I see a Lamb standing on a throne, and a river of blood that is wine. And all creation kneels and worships. It's the most blessed and beautiful thing I've ever seen."
- We might say, "There is no God. I don't see God." And the man with the revelation might say, "In Him we live and move and have our being."

Now, imagine if I was God. (It's a little game I like to play.) Imagine I was God, and Flatland existed inside of me. Then I couldn't be found in Flatland. But Flatland would be found in me. And what if I was love and my word was blessing. The people of Flatland would swim in love and vibrate to the sound of my blessing. But they couldn't see me unless I limited myself and my word, and entered Flatland preaching, "The kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Yet even then they'd probably judge me a heretic and nail me to a tree.

But do you see my point?

- Maybe we really have been "blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."
- Maybe reality is far more than three dimensions.
- Maybe we need "the eyes of our hearts enlightened," as Paul put it, in order to see that "we have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."
- Maybe you yourself are one of those blessings, already seated with Christ in the heavenly places.

- Maybe we look in a two-dimensional mirror, in just a moment in time, and say, “I see a failure. I see someone that is cursed. I see a beaten, naked man who deserves to be crucified.” But the man with the revelation says, “No. You are God’s masterpiece created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that you should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

Well, we all know that we live in three dimensions: length, width, and height. But in the twentieth century, physicists argued that time or duration is also a dimension. Physicists don’t know why, but we can only move one direction in the fourth dimension (time), although we dream about going back in time and changing our choices. We say, “If only,” but it’s like someone else is telling our story. Maybe *He* can go back in time and change our choices. Whatever the case, we’re not just three-dimensional beings.

[4th Dimension Movie Clip]

What would it be like to be a Flatlander living in a two-dimensional world? A two-dimensional creature would have only length and width, as if they were the royalty on an impossibly flat playing card. And we three-dimensional human beings would seem very strange indeed to a Flatlander.

OK, the first three dimensions can be described with these words: length, width, and depth. What word can we assign to the fourth dimension? One answer would be *duration*. If we think of ourselves as we were one minute ago, and then imagine ourselves as we are at this moment, the line we could draw from the one-minute-ago version to the right-now version would be a line in the fourth dimension.

If you were to see your body in the fourth dimension, you’d be like a long, undulating snake with your embryonic self at one end and your deceased self at the other. But because we live from moment to moment in the third dimension, we are like our second-dimensional Flatlanders.

Just like that Flatlander who can only see two-dimensional cross sections of objects from the dimension above, we as three-dimensional creatures can only see three-dimensional cross sections of our fourth-dimensional self.

Physicists postulate more than four dimensions. In fact, string theory postulates eleven. But all these dimensions began at the Big Bang. And that means that whatever is before the Big Bang, if you will, whatever is the foundation of the Big Bang, if you will, does not exist in space or time but just *is*. “I Am that I Am.” In other words, God sees all of you in an eternal moment. You are like that long, undulating snake.

[Image from end of previous video of an undulating snake starting from the left with a baby, then a young man, a middle-aged man, an old man and ending on the right with a coffin.]

We think we create the long, undulating snake with our choices, and in a way, we do. If you choose to go to medical school and become a doctor, the snake twists and turns in a particular way, with a particular shape. If you choose to drop out and rob a liquor store, the snake takes another shape. It’s interesting that the movie narrator refers to human life as that of a snake. Because the Bible clearly teaches that on our own, whether we choose to become a doctor or a thief, all of our choices are bad, and with them we create something like that snake. We create a shell of a man, an empty vessel, a life of death, darkness, lies, and empty existence.

Yet St. Paul, the man with the revelation, writes, “Christ will fill all things.” In fact, Ephesians 1:22 says, “We are His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” We say, “Nice metaphor, Paul.” And he shakes his head in frustration.

Think of it this way: We’ll remove one dimension from Flatland and add another called *time*. [Peter turns the board over.] So the bottom of the board is the beginning of time, and the top of the board is the end of time. Now let’s pretend once again that I’m God. I hold Flatland a millimeter from my face and say, “The time is at hand.” Well, it would be at hand at every moment in Flatland.

And then imagine I say, “Behold, I come!” and cram Flatland into me. Well, in one, eternal moment, I would’ve come to Flatland at every moment in time: the beginning and the end, and every moment in between.

So you see? Christ comes at the end of time. And at the moment you die. And they are the same moment. And maybe He comes now, if only (in the words of Paul) the eyes of our hearts were enlightened so we could see. That “seeing” is called faith, and faith is eternal life *now*.

Well, Christ comes to Flatland. Or maybe you could say we leave Flatland. Or maybe you could say we’re no longer imprisoned in Flatland. Or maybe you could say our two-dimensional, temporal, empty selves are filled with eternity. Or maybe even now they are full of eternity; it’s just that we only see one cross-section of ourselves in time. We only see one page of a great story. Or we only see our choices and don’t yet see God’s choice, God’s eternal choice that transforms all our temporal choices and fills our empty selves with meaning.

Maybe we can think of it this way: The bottom of the board is the beginning of your life, and the top of the board is the end of your life. And you are created in time with choices. So you start on your journey down here. And soon you’re presented with forks in the road—choices. You may choose the right road [Peter draws to the right], or you can choose the wrong road [Peter draws to the left]. These choices comprise your story and create the shape of yourself in time.

Most people think that if you make enough bad choices, you end up over here in Hell. Bad choices are called sin. But if you make enough good choices, you end up over here in Heaven. But, you see, Heaven is eternal. It’s not in Flatland. If anything, Flatland is in Heaven. However, Hell (that is, Hades), is clearly in Flatland. In fact, it’s getting stuck in Flatland, the depths of the earth.

Well, whatever the case, most evangelical Christians think it’s not the sum total of all your choices that gets you to Heaven. You really only have to make *one* choice, and that overrides all other choices. Of course, that choice is to choose Jesus. “I have decided to follow Jesus.”

The only problem with that idea is that Jesus said, “You didn’t choose me; I chose you.” And “apart from me, you can do nothing.” And according to Scripture, that is exactly what we choose: nothing. We choose a lie, darkness, death, outer darkness. Our choice is a lie and an illusion, and so with our choice, we create Hell and put flesh on the devil. Whether we choose to go to medical school or rob liquor stores, even our good choices are as filthy rags. So we’re not saved by our choices; we’re saved *from* our choices. In Biblical language, we’re saved from our sin.

Apart from Christ we can do nothing. And only in Christ can we do something. Only by the grace of God can we make a good choice. So we didn't choose Him, and yet He chose us to make good choices, or at least "walk in them."

He takes all our bad choices and transforms them into God's choices.
He takes our sin and transforms it into grace.
He takes our old man—our empty, sinful, snake-like man—and fills him with Himself,
the Eternal Word of God.

So He transforms Pharisee Saul into the Apostle Paul, and nothing gets wasted. He transforms Simon the Coward into Peter the Rock. He finishes our story and fills our empty sin with grace. And we live to the praise of His glory, a good choice.

But for now, just see this: All these choices comprise your story. All your choices, the ones you call good and the ones you call bad, happen here [on the board] in time. Every juncture, every "if" with which you are presented, every choice you make, is here in Flatland. But Paul writes, "You were chosen in Christ Jesus from the foundation of Flatland, the foundation of the *cosmos*, the foundation of the world."

That means, before space existed and before time began in a realm where words like "before" no longer work, in a realm where human language breaks down, God saw all of you, every choice, every sin, every decision, every flaw for which He would bleed and then fill with grace. He saw the sin you'll commit tomorrow.

He saw it all, and He made a choice. He spoke Word, and it all sprang into existence. Not just *foreseen* but *predestined*, for He is the Creator, even of time.

You see? There is one choice that matters. There is one will that is entirely free, and it's not yours. It's God's will, God's Word, God's choice, God's blessing. We took the blessing on the tree. But God forgave the blessing on the tree. Indeed He predestined that blessing on the tree. In other words, "You have been blessed in Christ Jesus with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places," even as He "chose you in Christ from the foundation of the world."

In other words: Children of God, your Father has blessed you, and there is no "if," other than the blessing itself. All of our decisions, all of our "ifs" exist within God's decision, God's "if," a decision decided before the world began and revealed on a tree, as Jesus Christ called out, "It is finished."

The decision...
 The judgment...
 The choice...
 The election of God...
 is finished.

You are predestined for every blessing. In other words, your Father says:

I love you with all my heart. I will always be your Daddy, and you will always be my son, my daughter. And you cannot change it. The "if" belongs to me. I am free. I am the Uncaused Cause. I am love. And I have decided. I have decided...to save you.

Isn't that incredible? Isn't it empowering, liberating, and comforting? It's amazing grace.

And everybody says, "Alleluia! Amen!" until I say the exact same thing but in a different way: That thing that most folks call "free will" and you may call "free will"—well, it's not free will. In fact, the Bible calls it sin.

What's free will?

Free will is so hard to talk about because the term really doesn't even appear in my Bible (the ESV or the KJV). And whenever people are told to "choose the good," like in Deuteronomy 30 or Joshua 24, it's soon revealed that they can't. Yet all the time American preachers preach that we have free will. "You are blessed *if*, saved *if*, forgiven *if*.... And it's your choice, because you have free will."

What do we mean by free will? I don't know what *you* mean, but don't most people mean this idea that a person can choose good or evil because that person is responsible for their own choices, that is, no one else causes their choices, because they are the cause of their own choices, which means they are the Uncaused Cause, the Uncreated Creator, the Unchosen Chooser, the Original "If," in other words, *God*?

If you make a choice, you are the chooser. Did you choose your own chooser? Are you the source of yourself? Let me put it another way: Are you an illegitimate bastard? I'm sorry to be so blunt, but think about what we can mean with that horrid word. Don't we mean a child that wasn't chosen but must choose? A child that has no source, no father? A child born outside of the unbreakable covenant of grace?

Satan wants you to believe that you're a bastard, and you're not. He wants you to believe that you are your own source, that you are an uncaused cause, that you are your own creator, savior, and redeemer, that God loves you *if* you choose something, for then your choice creates love, and God is love. Then you think you are God's creator, when in reality, you create a prison of darkness and lies. You create a false self, an empty shell, a vain ego. You create Hell and give flesh to the devil. You create desecration, un-creation, an empty void.

Whether you choose to make yourself a doctor or a thief, it's all sin when you believe you create yourself with your own free will. All sin comes from the belief that you are your own source, an uncaused cause, an illegitimate bastard. All sin comes from a lie whispered in your ear by a snake: "The father doesn't love you, so you better take some knowledge of good and evil from that tree. Take it so you can make your own choices and make yourself in the image of God. Ah, Hell, just make yourself God—a will, entirely free!"

In America, it's like our national anthem.

[Frank Sinatra recording. Sinatra says, "We will now do the national anthem, but you needn't rise" and then sings:]

*And now, the end is near
And so I face the final curtain...*

*For what is a man, what has he got?
If not himself, then he has not
To say the things he truly feels
And not the words of one who kneels*

*The record shows I took the blows
And did it my way*

“And not the words of one who kneels, the record shows...I did it my way.”

Amazing grace is utterly offensive to that arrogant spirit. Nothing is as offensive to the fallen children of Adam as amazing grace. Amazing grace literally kills us, literally crucifies us: that prideful, old, independent, hellish self that is us.

And I believe amazing grace will kill Frank Sinatra if it hasn't already killed him. When he faces the final curtain, he'll see that it's ripped from the top to the bottom. He'll look to the throne and see a Lamb standing as if He'd been slain. Sinatra will look at His hands and look at His feet and see the wounds carved into His back. And he'll realize that with his own way he inflicted every wound.

And then he'll hear a voice from the throne, and it will say something like this: “Frank, look! I love you with all my heart. I will always be your Daddy, and you will always be my son.”

And Frank will watch as a river of blood flows from that throne. It will burn away all his arrogance and pride, and fill all those empty places with life, transforming his sins into the revelation of grace, transforming his evil desires into God's good choice.

I don't know when it will happen. Perhaps after a million years in outer darkness. Perhaps it's happened already. But Frank Sinatra will be judged by the Living God, and then it will no longer be Frank Sinatra that lives, but Christ the Word of God—the will of God—that lives in Frank Sinatra.

And this will happen: Sinatra will drop to his knees giving praise to his Father through Jesus the Son, the Lamb standing on the throne. His knee will bow, and he will live to the praise of God's glory rather than his own glory. He will be free, and all his choices will be good—good and free—like a beloved child at play in his Father's garden. Frank Sinatra will be home.

The grace of God is the decision of God,
The judgment of God on all our judgments,
The only “if” that matters,
The mystery hidden for ages but now revealed at the cross,
Jesus Christ and Him crucified,
God's choice,
Relentless love.

Amazing grace kills us and sets us free.

Free to do what? Free to choose the good in freedom. You were not born with a “good free will.” But from the foundation of the cosmos, you were predestined for a good free will. How does God create that good free will? He consigns you to your own bad choices—disobedience—in order to reveal His good choice—mercy.

You have been chosen to choose the good in freedom, and God is the Good. You have been predestined for a good free will. And now you may ask, “Doesn't that make me an uncaused cause?” Well, no. It makes you the sanctuary of the Uncaused Cause. It makes you the very Body of Christ.

A good choice in you—faith, hope, or love in you—is God's eternal choice in you. It's the life of Christ in you, the decision of your Father in you. And thus, He makes you in His own image.

A good free will is the gift of God. So as soon as you take credit for that gift, it's no longer a gift and it's no longer free and it's no longer good and you're no longer dancing. For you no

longer believe you're a beloved child. You act like a bastard. Indeed you've taken the gift of God and nailed it to a tree.

Every evil choice comes from a fear that you are an illegitimate bastard. Every good choice comes from the conviction that you are a beloved son. Actually, it's the very Spirit of the Son rising in you.

We choose because we've been chosen. In other words, we love because He first loved us. So listen up, Carl Sagan: I know what lies on the other side of the Big Bang. I know what caused the Big Bang. It was a choice, and this is the choice...

Communion

This is the Word of God: He took bread and broke it saying, "This is my body. Take and eat." And He took the cup saying, "This is the covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins."

Whether or not God in Christ Jesus would do this is the only "if." And the answer is Yes! In 2 Corinthians 1:19, Paul writes, "In Christ it is always Yes!"

Yes! I love you with all my heart.
Yes! I will always be your Daddy.
Yes! You will always be my son, my daughter, my child.

You are *not* an illegitimate bastard.
You are my workmanship, created for my glory.

In Jesus' name, believe the Gospel.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you know us so much better than we know ourselves. You know that we live in this world with anxiety, shame, and fear, scared to death that we're illegitimate, scared to death that we don't belong to somebody, scared to death that there's not someone who loves us. Lord God, we're scared to death that you don't love us. From the foundation of the world, Lord Jesus, you do.

God, it terrifies us to think about what is beyond the foundation of the world. What good news to know it's *you*, Jesus! It's you. So we thank you, we praise you, amen.

Benediction

Your Father in Heaven as a stage to exhibit how much He loves you creates all things. The Creator says, "This is how much you matter to me: My body, my blood, my covenant." There is no other voice you must listen to.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, you are blessed. In Jesus' name, believe the Gospel. Amen.

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