

promise of a finish line. God is at work and is going to bring everything to completion. When everything reaches its fulfillment, God will place everything under Christ. In other words, in God's timing everything will be fulfilled. In addition, Paul adds that we have the Holy Spirit in us as a deposit of guarantee of what is to come. What God has begun in us, God will bring to conclusion. There is a finish line and God will be there to welcome us.

What are your goals for 2015? Where are you going to start? No matter what your goals might be, here is where you start. You start by knowing who you are in Christ and what God has in store for you. No matter what 2015 has in store for you, I want you to remember:

- You are blessed - God is with you
- You are chosen - at the cross God's love for you was proven once and for all
- You are destined - God has a purpose for your life
- You are forgiven - God's grace is sufficient for any and all of our sins. Where sin abounded, Grace super abounds.
- You have revelation - God has revealed to you God's plan of salvation.
- You have a promise - God will complete in your life what God has began. There is a finish line and God is there just as God is with you now.

You have no doubt seen pictures of Michelangelo's statue of David. Dr. Jim Dennison describes standing before it several years ago. He writes "I stood before it a few years ago, completely unprepared for the overwhelming sight. The statue stands some nine feet tall and is a stunning feat of artistic genius. As you may know, it was carved from a piece of marble other sculptors had rejected as flawed and useless."

This is what God wants to do with our lives in 2015. God wants to take our lives that others might see as flawed. God wants to take our lives that we might some days feel are useless. God wants to take our lives and mold them, make them and carve them into something beautiful and lasting.

So today we take our marks. We line up for the race. We fix our eyes on that which is not seen, for that which is not seen is eternal. We are ready to run for the finish line. We are ready because we are blessed, chosen, destined,

and forgiven. We are ready to start. Runners take your mark.



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The Starting Line

Ephesians 1:3-14

TRINITY PULPIT



It is a new year and it is time for our annual making of resolutions. Everywhere you look there are articles about making a New Year resolution and keeping a New Year resolution. Twitter reports that the top resolutions of the year are:

- Work out - If you have a gym membership be prepared for a wait at the treadmill
- Be Happy
- Lose Weight
- Stop Smoking
- Unplug
- Be the Best at your job or an activity or hobby
- Stop Drinking Alcohol
- Love Myself
- Work Harder

If we look at these top resolutions, they reveal a little about who we are as a culture. There are several resolutions concerning health. Whether it is to lose weight, stop smoking or drinking, or working out. There are a few about accomplishments, such as working hard or being the best at an interest. Then of course, there is the proverbial "just be happy and love myself." As a Christian, I look at this list and quickly see the absence of anything about a relationship with God and addressing our spiritual lives.

There is something else that this list reveals and that is we don't know how to begin. It is one thing to make a resolution and it is quite another to keep it. We all want to change, but actually changing a habit and making a life change is difficult. This is true spiritually as well. Most of us, as followers of Jesus, would want to include some spiritual goals for this year. It might be to read our Bibles more, or to read more devotional material, or meditate and pray more. It might be to find our place of service in the church and make a difference in the lives of others. It might be to be a more generous person in our giving, as to release us from the binding spirit of selfishness. We

can have some great goals. The hardest part is knowing where to start. Where do we find the starting line when it comes to pleasing God?

In the book of Ephesians, Paul is going to give instructions concerning how to live everyday life. Ephesians is not filled with instructions about a certain theological error. It is a letter of admonition to expand the thinking of the Ephesian Christians. Paul spent three years of ministry with the Ephesian church. It had become an evangelistic center. Paul addresses such issues as the uniting of the races. He discusses the Christian household and the relationship between husbands and wives. He gives instruction about Christian parenting. He discusses how we are to relate in work relationships. Paul writes of Christian maturity.

Think about those resolutions for a moment. What if our resolution list was not like the one on Twitter, but rather like the one found in Ephesians? What if our goals were:

1. To see fellow Christians as God's people regardless of race or ethnic background. Focus on the Christ that unites us and not what divides us.
2. To seek to have marriages that not only put the other person first, but also glorified God.
3. To raise children who more than anything else understood success as living a life pleasing to God.
4. To see our work as a gift and something we offered back to God as an act of worship.
5. To mature in our understanding of following Jesus above all other things in this world.

Those would be incredible goals for all of us. We might all agree those would be worthy goals. At least while we are sitting in church we would agree on those goals. The question would be where would we start? Paul gives us the starting place in the passage we read this morning. The

starting place for these goals, and really all goals, is to know who we are when we begin. We need an honest assessment of who we are as we begin. Let's look at how Paul describes the starting line in Ephesians 1.

Paul begins Ephesians with a reminder of who we are in Christ. In these few short verses, Paul uses seven active verbs to remind us of who we are in Christ. It is a great place to start 2015, regardless of what your goals and resolutions might be. Let's look at those seven words. This is our starting line.

The first word Paul uses is blessed. God has blessed you and me in the heavenly realms. Paul is reminding us that in Christ, God has blessed us now in this moment. The blessings of the heavenly realms are also ours in this moment. The blessing of the heavenly realms is the very presence of God with us. We have just come through the Christmas season and reaffirmed that Jesus is God's one and only son and that God became flesh and came to us. God dwelled with us. When Jesus left this earth, His promise was the Holy Spirit would come and dwell in us. So now, through Jesus, we have the blessing of the heavenly realms. Namely God's presence is with us now here in this moment. We have been blessed.

Vince, a devout Baptist, loved to sneak away to the racetrack. One day, he was there betting on the ponies, and nearly losing his shirt, when he noticed a priest step out onto the track and bless the forehead of one of the horses lining up for the fourth race. Lo and behold, this horse -- a very long shot -- won the race. Vince was very anxious to see what the priest did in the next race. Sure enough, he watched the priest step out onto the track, as the fifth race got underway. The horses lined up, and the priest placed a blessing on the forehead of one of the horses. Vince made a beeline for the window and placed a small bet on the horse. Again, even though another long shot, the horse the priest had blessed won the race. Vince collected his winnings and again anxiously waited to see which horse the priest bestowed his blessing on for the sixth race. The priest showed, blessed a horse; Vince bet on it, and it won! Vince was elated. As the day went on, the priest continued blessing one of the horses, and it always came in first. Vince began to pull in some serious money, and by the last race, he knew his wildest dreams were going to come true. He made a quick stop at the ATM, withdrew big money and awaited the priest's blessing that would tell him which horse to bet on. True to his pattern, the priest stepped out onto the track before the last race and blessed the forehead, eyes, ears and hooves of one of the horses. Vince bet every cent, and watched the horse come in dead last. He was dumbfounded. He made his way to the track and when he found the priest, he demanded, "What

happened, Father? All day you blessed horses and they won. The last race, you blessed a horse and he lost. Now, thanks to you, I've lost all my savings!" The priest was unimpressed and unmoved by this outburst. He said, "That's the problem with you Protestants ... you can't tell the difference between a simple blessing and Last Rites."

It is true we sometimes do not recognize blessings. The very things we think in life are the end of the road can become the open door for God's blessing. The end of everything is the beginning of everything. Let me give you an example. Death is probably our most feared moment and when we experience the death of one close to us we think it is a most terrible thing and it is. However, it is in death that we regain perspective of what is important. It is passing through death we affirm our hope in Christ. It is in death that we begin to count our days aright. The last rite can become a blessing. No matter what we have passed through or what we might pass through this year, we begin this year with the knowledge that we are blessed and that blessing comes in the form of God's constant presence.

We are chosen. We were chosen in Him before creation. When we find the term "in Him" the Bible is referring to the work of Christ. The work of Christ is the cross and resurrection. So, in the cross and resurrection we were chosen. God chose you and me to receive His incredible love through Jesus Christ. No matter what we have ahead of us in 2015, we must remember that what Jesus died on the cross was for you and for me. He chose us to receive His forgiveness. As we begin 2015, let us begin it forgiven. Let us not carry with us into this New Year the same old sins. Let us not bear the shame and guilt of the past. Let us no longer be lied to and demeaned by others and ourselves that somehow we are not worthy or that we are not loved. I want you to remember that what ever you pass through in this New Year you are forgiven and God loves you. The cross and resurrection prove this love once and for all.

Before we get too haughty about this idea of being chosen, please let us affirm today that this choosing in Christ is not just for us but also for all people. God chose all people in the cross and resurrection to receive God's forgiveness. To all who will receive Him, God has given the power to become the very children of God.

We are destined or predestined is the Word. The Word is many times misused and misinterpreted. Some interpret this to mean that there were just some of us who were meant to be followers of Jesus. However, that is neither what the Word means nor the context of the Word. Those who were chosen in Christ and that is everyone are also destined to be adopted as sons through Jesus

Christ. Now Paul uses the term son, not to be sexist or to suggest that women are not included. Just the opposite. The son was the heir. The son had all the rights. The son was the promise of the future. We are destined to receive from God all that God has for us. This includes men and women who will receive God's gift of salvation.

The picture here is also of one who is adopted or chosen and will always remain a child. "Predestined" translates proorizo, to mark out with a boundary beforehand or foreordain. God marked us "to be adopted as His sons," one of the most powerful analogies in all the Bible. There was no Jewish custom for adoption, and so the background must have been Roman. In the Roman world, a father had patria potestas, absolute power over his family. As a result, he could disown his biological son at any time for any reason. However, an adopted son could never be disowned or disinherited. God chose us, marked us out to be His children never to be disowned.

The word destined also has a sense of purpose. As we begin 2015, remember that you are chosen, that is forgiven, and you are destined, that is you have a purpose, and that purpose is eternal in nature. Paul describes it as being holy and blameless in God's sight. God is at work in our character and in our actions. God is at work in our lives setting us apart for God's use. We are being made holy. God is at work in our lives making us blameless, which is filling our lives with godliness. That is our purpose. Our purpose is to be used by God. As we begin 2015, we must remember we have a purpose and that purpose is to be used by God.

The fourth and fifth words go together. God has bestowed and lavished on us God's grace. The word bestow does not show up in the NIV, but the word is expressed in the phrase in verse 6 "grace which He has freely given us in the One He loves. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace the He lavished on you with all wisdom and understanding.

God bestows upon us and lavishes us with God's grace. God's love and grace is not dependent on our actions. God's grace is undeserved and unearned. God has bestowed it upon us. So many times we spend our days trying to earn God's favor, God's forgiveness and God's

blessing, yet Paul is telling us God has bestowed it upon us. It is ours and to stress this concept Paul adds it has been lavished upon us.

The term means overwhelming and over pouring. God is not stingy when it comes to grace. He is generous and opulent. There are moments in life when we think we must earn God's grace and forgiveness. Paul says, "No, God bestows it." There are moments in life when we think God could never forgive me for this, or probably more appropriate, God could never forgive me again for that. All of our broken promises. All of our best intentions gone awry. All of our failures and sins... God pours out God's grace.

The sixth word is a phrase "made known." God has made known to us the mystery of Jesus Christ. It is a mystery not in a way that it is hidden, but rather a mystery in the sense that God reveals it. God is not in the hide and seek business. There are those that believe that God is always playing hide and seek with them, and just when they think they have life figured out God moves the prize. This picture of God is one who dangles a prize before

us just out of reach, just out of our understanding, just beyond our experience. Yet, the God of the Bible is so different than this picture. The God of the Bible is the one who is actively revealing His self to us. God comes to the Garden in search of man and woman who have sinned. God comes to Abram and calls him to god. God meets Moses on the backside of nowhere when Moses is not looking for God. God comes to Elijah when he is hiding out and has discovered that God was not present where he was looking. God comes to us in a manger, in human form, in the person of Jesus. God reveals to us. It is not us seeking God... it is God seeking us. God makes known to us the mystery of Jesus. Here is this mystery. Jesus is God's one and only son. Jesus came to die for you and me and for the entire world. That is the great mystery that is revealed to us and must be shared with others. We do not have to spend our lives wondering does God care, love me, or is God involved and active? We do not have to spend our lives wondering is God concerned. The answer to all of this is yes, and God has made it known in Jesus.

The final word is finish. The passage ends with the

NO MATTER WHAT WE HAVE AHEAD OF US IN 2015, WE MUST REMEMBER THAT WHAT JESUS DIED ON THE CROSS WAS FOR YOU AND FOR ME. HE CHOSE US TO RECEIVE HIS FORGIVENESS. AS WE BEGIN 2015, LET US BEGIN IT FORGIVEN. LET US NOT CARRY WITH US INTO THIS NEW YEAR THE SAME OLD SINS. LET US NOT BEAR THE SHAME AND GUILT OF THE PAST. LET US NO LONGER BE LIED TO AND Demeaned BY OTHERS AND OURSELVES THAT SOMEHOW WE ARE NOT WORTHY OR THAT WE ARE NOT LOVED.