

God's Eternal Purpose In Christ Jesus Our Lord Ephesians 3:11

The King James Version here speaks of God's "eternal purpose which he *purposed* in Christ Jesus our Lord". But the Greek text does not speak of a purpose merely *purposed* but rather of a purpose actually *done*.

Commentators are divided regarding as to the manner in which God's purpose was done in Christ. Some say God's purpose was *made* in Christ (see Young's Literal Translation). Most say it was *accomplished* in Christ (see Green's Literal Translation, New King James Version).

Both are theologically correct: God's eternal purpose was *made* in Christ before the foundation of the world and *accomplished* in Christ when He shouted in His death "It is finished!" (John 19:30).

God's purpose cannot fail! He Himself says so:

- "Jehovah of hosts has sworn, saying, 'Surely, as I have thought, so it shall come to pass, and as I have purposed, so it shall stand Jehovah of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it?'" (Isaiah 24:24, 27).
- "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure.' ... Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it" (Isaiah 46:9-11).

Note also that our text speaks of God's eternal purpose in "Christ Jesus our Lord". God's eternal purpose was accomplished in *Jesus* of Nazareth, the *Christ* who is the incarnate Son of God, *our Lord* and Savior.

We here will consider "God's eternal purpose in Christ Jesus our Lord":

- God's "purpose" is His fixed intention – "the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11). God does all His works *on* purpose and *for* a purpose. God does nothing unintentionally or accidentally.
- God's purpose is "eternal" because it spans the ages, having neither beginning nor ending in time.
- God's "eternal purpose in Christ Jesus our Lord" is His decree from eternity for the salvation of His people – who confess that "He has saved us and called us ..., not according to our works, but according to *His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began*" (2 Timothy 1:9).

God's eternal decree for the salvation of His people concerns things done by Him for them:

- "from eternity" (Acts 15:18);
- "before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4);
- "before time began" (2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:2);
- "before the ages" (1 Corinthians 2:7);
- "beforehand" (Romans 9:23);
- "from the beginning" (2 Thessalonians 2:13) – which is "from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was

ever an earth" (Proverb 8:23; see also 1 John 1:1 & 2:13-14; cp. Ephesians 1:4);

- "from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34) – which is the same as "from eternity" (as indicated in Revelation 17:8).

And it concerns persons who were by Him:

- *foreknown* (Romans 8:29);
- *foreordained* (1 Peter 1:20);
- *predestined* (Ephesians 1:11). (More on these below.)

We here will consider these aspects of God's eternal purpose for His people:

1. God foreknew His people;
2. God eternally and savingly loved His people;
3. God predestined His people;
4. God chose His people;
5. God prepared His people for glory;
6. God foreordained Christ to redeem His people;
7. God promised eternal life to His people;
8. God prepared the eternal kingdom of His people;
9. God foreordained to reveal to His people the wisdom of His eternal purpose;
10. God foreordained the good works of His people;
11. God decreed that all whom He had purposed to save would believe the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I. God foreknew His people (Romans 8:29): They are all "whom He *foreknew*".

This foreknowledge is not mere *prescience* (*pre*= "before" + *science*= "knowledge", pronounced *pres'hens*), that "prior knowledge" God had of all things because of His omniscience (literally "all-knowledge"), by which "God ... knows all things" (1 John 3:20). For example, the omniscient Judge will say to some of whom He had prescience, "I *never* knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" (Matthew 7:23). They were *ever* known by God because of His omniscience, but *never* known by Him because they persisted in their sins against Him, and were not *foreknown* by Him.

The Greek word translated "foreknew" (*proginōs'kō*, from *pro*= "before" + *ginōs'kō*= "know") has in its root the verb indicating a relationship between the knower and the known (as in John 10:14; 1 Corinthians 8:3), even a most intimate and experiential relationship (Matthew 1:25; Luke 1:34). It is also used of one who has been approved by the knower (as in Galatians 4:9). God did not merely know *about* His people in some casual manner. Rather, He knew *them* intimately and experientially.

God's foreknowledge of His people is a ground of everything else He did and does for them. This includes:

- their election to salvation, for they are "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Peter 1:2);
- all things that work together for their good (Romans 8:28-30): "28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. 29 For whom He *foreknew*, He also *predestined* to be conformed to the image of His Son,

that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. 30 Moreover whom He predestined, these He also *called*; whom He called, these He also *justified*; and whom He justified, these He also *glorified*.”

The fact that eternally “The Lord knows those who are His” is the *seal* of “the solid foundation of God” (2 Timothy 2:19). Consequently, “God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew” (Romans 11:2).

But He will cast away the wicked.

II. *God eternally and savingly loved His people* (Jeremiah 31:3).

1. God loved His people from eternity. This we know because Jesus Christ acknowledged to His Father, “You have ... loved them as You have loved Me. ... You loved Me *before the foundation of the world*” (John 17:23f).

2. God saves in time whom He loved from eternity. This we know because God assures His people, “Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting/eternal love; therefore with lovingkindness *I have drawn you*” (Jeremiah 31:3).

3. But He hates the wicked, and rejects them (Psalm 5:4-6).

III. *God predestined His people* (Romans 8:29): “For whom He foreknew, He also *predestined*”

The word *predestined* means “determined beforehand”. Before the foundation of the world, God predestined His foreknown people in a three-fold manner:

First, God predestined His people to be *like Christ* (Romans 8:29): “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.”

Second, God predestined His people to be *His adopted children by Christ* (Ephesians 1:5): “having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will”.

Third, God predestined His people to be *the recipients of an eternal inheritance in Christ* (Ephesians 1:11): “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.”

IV. *God chose His people* (Romans 9:11): “*the purpose of God according to election* [is] not of works but of Him who calls”. God the Father purposed to choose His people according to His free and sovereign grace, not because of any works they perform.

This election and its purpose are set forth in two texts:

- Ephesians 1:3-4: “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ chose us in Him *before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love”;
- 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14: “God *from the beginning* chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

These two texts indicate the four-fold purpose of God in choosing them:

- to be “holy” – separated from the world, consecrated to God, dedicated to worshiping and serving Him;
- to be “without blame” or “without blemish” – perfect, not disqualified;
- to be before God “in love” – never objects of His hatred;
- “for salvation” – from sin, from sin’s consequences, from God’s wrath coming upon the wicked.

Note also in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 that God the Father not only purposed the salvation of His people in old eternity but also predestined the manner in which they would be saved in time.

Note also that God’s elect were chosen “in Christ” – who accomplished God’s purpose for His chosen.

V. *God prepared His people for glory* (Romans 9:22f): “What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had *prepared beforehand for glory*.”

1. These “vessels of *wrath*” are “prepared for destruction” through their own misconduct against God. They are by God “endured with much longsuffering”. But they ultimately will be justly destroyed through God’s “wrath” and “power”.

2. In contrast to them are “the vessels of *mercy*, which God had prepared beforehand [before the foundation of the world and in His eternal purpose] for glory.”

VI. *God foreordained Christ to redeem His people* (1 Peter 1:18-21): “you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was *foreordained* before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God.”

1. What was beheld by men in the sacrifice of Christ on earth two thousand years ago was predestined by God before the earth was created.

2. This foreordained redeeming Lamb is therefore “the Lamb from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). When the world was founded by God’s hand, Christ the Lamb was already slain in God’s eternal decree. And from eternity the names of all for whom He died were immutably “written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”.

3. The death of Jesus Christ by wicked men was therefore predestined by God (Acts 2:23; 4:27f):

- Peter told them, “Him, being delivered by the *determined purpose and foreknowledge of God*, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.”
- Christ’s disciples acknowledged to God, “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the

people of Israel, were gathered together to do *whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.*”

VII. God promised eternal life to His people (Titus 1:1f): “the faith of God’s elect and the acknowledgment of the truth which accords with godliness [is] in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, *promised before time began.*”

All God’s promises purposed in eternity are fulfilled in time! Nothing promised by God from eternity to His people will fail to be accomplished in time. For God is incapable of lying or forgetting.

VIII. God prepared the eternal kingdom of His people (Matthew 25:34): At the final judgment “the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom *prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*’”

We are not surprised that the Eternal King (as He is called in 1 Timothy 1:17) has an eternal kingdom.

But we are blessed in knowing that, while earthly kings prepare kingdoms for themselves at the expense of their subjects, our King prepared His kingdom for the eternal bliss of His subjects.

This kingdom purposed and prepared by God for His people is:

- *eternal* – already “prepared for you from the foundation of the world”;
- “an inheritance ... predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11);
- “an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:4f).

IX. God foreordained to reveal to His people the wisdom of His eternal purpose (1 Corinthians 2:7): “we [gospel preachers] speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God *ordained before the ages* [i.e., *foreordained* or *predestined*] for our glory.”

1. This “wisdom of *God*” is the opposite of “*human* wisdom”/“wisdom of *men*”/“wisdom of *this age* [‘this world’ in KJV]” (vv.4, 5, 6), which often is foolish and results in the salvation of no one.

2. This wisdom of God is “in a mystery”, undiscoverable by human wisdom or reason, requiring revelation from God.

3. This wisdom of God is “hidden” by God from unbelievers, but revealed by Him to believers through the message preached to them by God’s preachers.

4. And this wisdom of God “is a system of truth which God from eternity had determined to reveal for the salvation of his people. In other words, it is the revelation of the counsels of eternity in reference to the redemption of man” (Charles Hodge, in his commentary on this text).

X. God foreordained the good works of His people (Ephesians 2:10): “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God *prepared beforehand* that we should walk in them.”

The good works of God’s people are His own foreordained works purposed from eternity!

For example, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent” (John 6:29; cp. Isaiah 26:12).

And when believers obey the exhortation to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”, they realize that “it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12f).

XI. God decreed that all whom He had purposed to save would believe the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 13:48): “And as many as had been *appointed* [‘were ordained’ in KJV] to eternal life believed.”

Two attempts have been made to change God’s purpose and grace in this text to man’s will and work.

First are those who change the meaning of the Greek verb translated *appointed/ordained* (*tassō*) to *disposed* or *inclined*. According to them, this text might read “as many as were disposed or inclined to embrace eternal life believed.” However, the Greek verb does not denote an internal disposition or inclination arising from within oneself. Rather, it speaks of an appointment to one made by another. For example: Jesus appointed certain things for Saul of Tarsus to do (Acts 22:10); Saul was not to follow his own disposition or inclination regarding what do so.

Second are those who reverse the order of this text so that it might read “as many as believed were ordained to eternal life.” This is egregious!

- It perverts the Scripture.
- It denies God’s purpose.
- It exalts man’s will.
- It makes God dependent on man.
- It puts the cart before the horse.

Let us take this text at face value. Divine ordination to eternal life is the *cause*, not the *effect*, of any man’s believing. God’s election and predestination from eternity is the moving cause of man’s faith in Christ in time. And all who believe in Christ Jesus our Lord receive eternal life.

And thusly is God’s purpose for them accomplished through Christ Jesus our Lord.

– Daniel E. Parks