

The Blessings that Matter Most

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as Mark mentioned, we're beginning a new series through Paul's letter to the Ephesians this morning. And I want to start by asking you this question. I wonder if you've ever looked at the blessings others have in life and felt a bit disappointed with the ones you have.

I'd love to have a bit more Queensland sunshine during our Melbourne winter, perhaps a beach nearby. That would be nice. And although we've had a nice day yesterday and today, the forecast for tomorrow is more Melbourne grey.

Or perhaps you'd like the blessing of a better job or money, a better health or body, or perhaps better freedom or liberty.

I mean, at the moment, it would be nice to have the blessing of a bit more freedom, wouldn't it? Perhaps like WA or South Australia or Tassie. Last Sunday, there was an article in the ABC on Pitcairn Island, which is an island in the South Pacific that is COVID-free and an idyllic place to be.

And that sounds like a nice blessing to have at the moment, doesn't it? Well, today we begin a new series, as I said, in Ephesians, so-called because it's a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in the city of Ephesus, a city in Turkey today.

[1 : 2 8] And the letter speaks about our privileged place in God's big plan. A plan centred on Christ and a place that calls us to live a life worthy of it.

And so the first three chapters speak about our privileged place in God's plan, especially as non-Jews, what the Bible calls Gentiles, who have even less claim on God's blessings than the Jews do.

And then the next three chapters speak about how to live in response, how to live a life worthy of this privileged calling you have received.

And so Ephesians is all about our privileged place in God's Christ centred plan and how we're to live in response to it.

And as we see afresh our privileged place, it helps us to know our true worth as God's church, particularly in a world where the worth of the church is dropping dramatically, isn't it?

[2 : 4 0] Or today with today's passage, it helps us to remember how blessed we are, especially when we feel disappointed by the blessings we don't have.

Because today, Paul begins by reminding us that we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. So point one and verse three.

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.

Now, these are spiritual blessings because they are given by the Holy Spirit, but also because they're part of the heavenly realms, it says there, which is a spiritual reality.

A reality where Christ is seated at the right hand of God and rules over all. A reality people sometimes sense when they see things in life that they can't explain.

[3 : 48] When we see Christ rule in our world or those coincidences or God incidences in our lives. But it's a reality we generally cannot see because it's spiritual, but it's still real nonetheless.

Yet the really important place these blessings are found is at the end of verse three. In Christ. They are connected to Christ.

He is Abraham's ultimate descendant. In our first reading, God promised all peoples on earth would be blessed through Abraham.

Well, this is how. For Christ is Abraham's ultimate descendant. That's why Paul repeats the idea of in Christ or in him ten times in our passage.

That's why these blessings are found in the heavenly realms, because that's where Christ is seated. These spiritual blessings are found in Christ.

[4 : 53] And notice in verse three again, we have every one of them. Every spiritual blessing on offer. Every spiritual blessing there is.

Every spiritual blessing found in Christ. They're all ours now. In 1989, the band Queen released a song called, I want it all, I want it all, I want it now.

Which sounds like the anthem of kids these days. They want everything now, don't they? But when it comes to these spiritual blessings, we have them all, we have them all, we have them now.

I mean, that's pretty amazing, isn't it? It's a pretty privileged position to be in, isn't it? And no wonder Paul praises God.

And so what are these blessings then? Well, Paul now unpacks some of them. I point to verse four. So here is the blessing of election.

[6 : 14] God chose or elected us to be holy and blameless in his sight. To inherit his kingdom, to be part of his people.

Now, of course, we still have to believe in Jesus, as we'll see later in verse 13. But even before we did, God chose us, elected us.

In other words, before the creation of the world, God had you in mind. And that's pretty amazing, isn't it? And it makes us incredibly special, doesn't it?

I remember at school playing lunchtime soccer. You know, when you'd have two of the good kids and they'd pick their teams to play soccer at lunchtime.

Now, I wasn't particularly athletic as a kid. I'm still not, actually. But I remember one lunchtime when the best soccer player in the whole school chose me to be on his team.

[7 : 19] I was so excited. It was the best day of school ever. But how much more so being elected or chosen to be on God's team? No wonder Paul praises God.

But wait, there's more. Our election led to our adoption. Verse 5 and 6. In love, God predestined us for adoption, to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will, to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in Christ, the one he loves.

And so here is the blessing of adoption. In love, God predestined or elected us to be adopted. And it says adopted to sonship, which is not a comment about gender.

It's a comment about privilege. For in the ancient world, it was the firstborn son who was the privileged one, who got the father's inheritance, who took on the father's business, who received the father's blessings.

Well, God adopted us to be equal firstborn sons with Christ. So that everything Christ receives, we receive.

- [8 : 44] His inheritance, his blessings, means even the father's business of ruling the new creation. Some of these we can enjoy now, like being able to call God our father, having access to him, that blessing.
- Other parts of our adoption we'll enjoy later in the new creation, like ruling with Christ. But our adoption to sonship is a blessing that is ours now.
- And it means in God's eyes, we are as precious to him as his only son Christ is.
- Do you realize that? You can't get more privileged than that. Can you? No wonder Paul praises God.
- But wait, there's more. To be adopted means there is payment to be made. Just like adoption these days, kids need to be redeemed from the state or from an orphanage, which is not cheap.
- [9 : 51] We've got some friends who have adopted three children and they say that it's cost them thousands of dollars, particularly when they first tried to adopt from overseas. And like adoption these days, the kids don't pay the price to be redeemed, do they?
- As someone else pays the price to be redeemed. Which is an act of grace. You see, adoption involves redemption paid by another, which is an act of grace.
- So too with us. Verse 7 and 8. In him or in Christ, we have redemption. How? Through his blood.
- The forgiveness of sins, which is an act of God's rich grace that he lavished on us. You see, here is the next blessing of redemption.
- Again, paid by Christ's blood, which is an act of God's grace. In fact, it's so gracious, Paul speaks of God's rich grace, doesn't he?
- [11 : 02] That he's lavished on us. Which when you think about it, is so true. I mean, our redemption cost God much more than a few thousand dollars, didn't it?
- It cost him the blood of his only son, and yet God willingly paid it. And Christ willingly gave it.
- It really is amazing grace. No wonder Paul praises God. But wait, there's more. God has also revealed his plan to us.
- So the rest of verse 8 to 10. With all wisdom and understanding, God made known to us, or revealed to us, the mystery of his will, his plan, according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ.
- To be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment, to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth, under Christ. Here is the blessing of revelation.
- [12 : 09] God has made known, or revealed his master plan to us. In other words, we now know what God is on about in this world.
- People sometimes ask, what on earth is God doing in this world? Well, this. He is working to unite, or gather, all things in Christ.
- And bring all things under his lordship. As our mission statement says at the bottom right hand of your screens there, it's to go, gather, and grow in Christ.
- That's what God is on about. You see, Jesus is the focal point of the universe. He is the destination to which everything and everyone is moving, whether things in heaven or on earth.
- And so when the fullness of time comes, everyone will find their identity in him, whether as his brothers and sisters or as his enemies.

[13 : 15] And everyone will call him Lord, whether willingly as Christians or unwillingly as non-Christians. Christians. God's plan is all about gathering everything and everyone together under Christ.

Now, I know COVID has kiboshed many of our plans, hasn't it? Whether it's been birthday parties, weddings, holidays, or simply seeing family.

COVID has prevented our plans from happening. But it won't prevent God's plan from happening. In fact, we've had people become Christians during COVID and baptisms this year.

We were even supposed to have a confirmation service this evening where teenagers would publicly declare they follow Christ, which is a big step for teenagers, even for adults, actually.

You see, God's plan to gather and grow people under Christ is still happening. And this revelation is a blessing because it gives us direction in life.

[14 : 28] Oh, sure, it doesn't tell us which specific job to take or which road to turn down in life, but it does give us general guidelines. Like, will that job or road help or hinder us from taking part in God's plan?

A friend of ours turned down a promotion at work because she knew the constant travel would take her away from church and eventually away from Christ.

You see, God's plan shaped her plans and it should shape ours too. Whether it's planning to make time to read the Bible or even buying a reading guide to help you that we might live more and more under Christ or planning to pray for people's health and study or work, sure, but also planning to pray for their soul that they might turn to Christ and grow in Christ or planning to use some of our time and money to help others find their identity and worth in Christ.

You know, by serving at church when we can or giving to gospel mission as we can. The point is this revelation is a blessing because it gives direction and it helps us shape our plans for life if, of course, we let it.

Or do our plans, on the other hand, take priority over God's so that we're happy to live under Christ's loving lordship when it suits our plans and preferences but not so willing when it doesn't.

[16 : 16] We have this blessing of revelation and so the question is, are we on board with it? But wait, there's more like inclusion at verse 11 to 13.

In Christ or 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 hope in Christ might be for the praise of his glory and you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.

I said at the start that Ephesians is about our privileged place in God's Christ-centered plan. But our privilege is even more pronounced when we remember that we non-Jews, Gentiles remember, are even less deserving than the Jews.

At least the Jews had a history of God being their God. We have nothing. And yet we here have been included. Did you notice the language of we and you?

So in verse 11, Paul says, we Jews were chosen. And then in verse 13, he says, you Gentiles were also included.

[17 : 48] Here is the blessing of inclusion. We often forget what a blessing and privilege this is, don't we? We just assume that we Gentiles have just as much right to be part of God's people as the Jews, but we have even less.

I mean, no one has the right, but we have even less. And yet we were included as equals when we heard the gospel, the good news about Jesus and believed in him.

And so can I ask at this point, do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe in him? Because if you don't, then you won't know any of these blessings.

blessings. But if you do, then you have every one of them. Election, adoption, redemption, revelation, inclusion, and assurance.

I couldn't turn assurance into a shun word. I'm sorry about that. But it's there in the rest of verse 13 and 14. Do you see there? When you believed, you were marked in him, in Christ, 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.

[19 : 11] The Spirit has not only given us all these spiritual blessings in Christ, but he's also given us the blessing of assurance. As verse 14 put it, a guarantee of our inheritance.

How? Well, it says there that the Spirit firstly acts like a seal of God's people. It's like those wax seals that kings use on their letters on the screen there.

The seal did two things. It firstly showed who the letter belonged to, the king, and secondly, it protected the letter from being tampered with because no one would break that seal lest they suffered the wrath of the king.

And so the seal effectively ensured safe delivery of the letter. Well, we are like the letter and the Spirit is like the wax seal.

The Spirit shows we belong to God as his treasured possession or people and so guarantees our safe delivery to our heavenly inheritance, our inheritance in the new creation.

[20 : 24] But the Spirit also, we're told, is described as a deposit that guarantees our inheritance. The Spirit is God's down payment on us that guarantees he will bring us home.

It's like a deposit on a new car, for example. You know, it guarantees the car is yours, no one else can buy it, but it also guarantees the car that you will bring it home because you're not going to waste your deposit, are you?

Well, we are like that car and the Spirit is God's deposit on us that guarantees he will bring us home. This is the assurance we have and it really is a blessing, especially in the face of suffering and death.

death. There's very few things that are certain in life these days, aren't there? But our eternal life is certain.

It's guaranteed, which is a real comfort if we suffer loss in this life or face death in this life because we know we have an inheritance to come that will more than make up for all of it.

[21 : 41] We've had a number of people pass away at our church over the last month or so and for several of them, or in fact for most of them, it was this assurance that meant they knew where they were going and it meant their loved ones could let them go.

It's still hard to lose loved ones. Even years later it remains hard. But God's guarantee brings comfort, doesn't it?

The non-Christian funeral, though, is hopelessly hard because there's no assurance. The best they have is wishful thinking.

Now at this point we may be thinking it's all well and good to have all these spiritual blessings in Christ, but how about some physical blessings in life? I mean, how about a little less stress and a bit more money?

A little less suffering and a bit more health? Perhaps a little less COVID and a bit more freedom? Perhaps a place on Pitcairn Island? How about that?

[22 : 55] But here's the thing. Even when we get those physical blessings, they don't last long, do they? I mean, when Michelle started working, we had more money coming into our bank account, but now there seems to be more bills where the money goes out of the bank account.

In fact, it seems to go out of the bank quicker than it comes in. It doesn't last. We may build a healthy superannuation balance, but it doesn't last.

We might get better health, but then something else with our health happens. Our health doesn't last. Our job satisfaction doesn't last. Our holidays sadly don't last.

And our freedom doesn't last. Lockdowns get extended, don't they? Now, don't get me wrong, we still need some of these physical blessings, so they're still good.

It's just that spiritual blessings are actually better. Because first, they do last. They're secure in Christ in the heavenly realms.

[24 : 06] No one can take them from us. We can't lose them. But second, because they lead to life in the world to come. We will enjoy physical blessings that will last.

You see, our election, adoption, redemption, inclusion, and assurance all mean the guarantee of eternity, of life to the full in the world to come.

So which would you really rather? The physical blessing of perfect health that might last a hundred years, or the spiritual blessing of election that will lead to perfect health for an eternity of years?

Or which would you rather? The physical blessing of a healthy bank balance that might last a hundred years, or the spiritual blessing of adoption that leads to sharing in Christ riches for an eternity of years?

Which would you rather? The physical blessing of freedom from lockdown that might last a hundred years? Our last freedom lasted less than two weeks though. Or would you rather the spiritual blessing of assurance that guarantees physical freedom for an eternity of years?

[25 : 29] Which would you rather? It's easy to focus on our immediate problems and think, if only we had this or that blessing now, that physical blessing now. But even if we did, they don't always last, do they?

And the best they can do is make a lifetime of difference. But the spiritual blessings do last and lead to an eternity of difference.

difference. So these spiritual blessings are actually the ones that really matter most. And in Christ, we have every one of them.

No wonder Paul praises God. Which is really the big application for us this morning to remember these blessings in Christ, that we might praise God in life.

The idea of praise is repeated, and I've tried to repeat it throughout as well on your screen. It's throughout our passage, isn't it? In fact, God has blessed us for this purpose, that we might rightly praise him for all he's done.

[26 : 44] That we might praise God with our lips, whether thanking him in prayer or praising him in song, which we'll do in a moment. Praise God with our lives by reflecting his character or honouring him with our actions.

When you're feeling disappointed about the blessings you don't have, then remember the blessings you do have in Christ. That they are the ones that matter most, and you have every one of them.

Remember the blessings we have in Christ, that you might continue to praise God in life. As the old hymn goes, which we don't have pre-recorded unfortunately on your screens though, when you look at others with their lands and gold, remember Christ has promised you his wealth untold.

Count your many blessings money cannot buy, your reward in heaven and your home on high. Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your blessings, see what God has done.

Let's pray. Praise be to you, our God and Father, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

[28 : 07] Help us, we pray, to remember that these are the blessings that matter most, and that we have every one of them in Christ, that we may continue to praise you in life.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.