

# #blessed

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 14 July 2024

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning. My name is Tommy. I'm the rector here, and on behalf of our church, I'd like to welcome you. I'm delighted that you're here. And I'm so glad that we get to open God's Word together today.

I love the lectionary readings. They've been speaking to me very personally lately, and I'm just thankful for that. You know, the word blessing is an interesting word because we hear it all the time. And in many ways, I would say it's an overused word. I mean, it's a word that we use to describe all kinds of good things that happen in our lives, and that's not always bad. But we might, for instance, take a picture of ourselves on vacation this summer and post it online, put hashtag blessed under it. What a blessing to be here. You know, some people use the word blessing as a way to kind of humble brag about their own successes. I've been so blessed with all of these promotions in my job, right, and all the hard work that I've done.

We say it after people sneeze. We hear this word quite a bit. And there's nothing really wrong with that, but the problem is that we use this word so much that I think we've lost a lot of the sense of what it actually means to say that we are blessed.

[ 1 : 27 ] Whatever difficulties you might be facing in your life, whether they are internal struggles like anxiety, depression, hopelessness, or external struggles, conflict or job stress or parenting stress, whatever difficulties are pulling at the edges of your attention right now, whatever difficulties keep you up at night wringing your hands, whatever we're dealing with, the thing that we most need to get through those challenges is God's blessing in our life.

That's the thing that we most need. We're going to look at these opening verses of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, probably the most extraordinary description of the meaning of God's blessing for us that you'll find anywhere in the Bible.

And we're going to ask a couple of questions. What is a blessing really? And then what is God's blessing for you and for me this morning?

Let's pray and then we will open God's word together. Our heavenly Father, we know that you are present. We know that you're with us.

We may have some awareness of that. We may not. We may not feel it at all. But Lord, we know that does not matter. What matters is that you are present.

[ 2 : 52 ] We ask now that you would speak. These are not mere words written on a page. These are living words. We pray that you would speak through your word and bring us face to face with the word become flesh, Jesus Christ.

We pray that somehow in the mystery of your Holy Spirit, your word would become flesh in us, that we might be changed by what we hear and receive from you this morning.

We pray this in the name of Jesus, by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen. So what is a blessing? A lot of times when we hear the word bless or blessing, we think of it as a kind of way of encouraging someone, well-wishing them, blessing them.

And in one sense, that's true, but in the Bible, it means far more than that. If you consider examples of blessing in the Old Testament, for instance, when Isaac blesses Jacob, or when then Jacob goes on to bless his 12 sons, or when Samuel anoints and blesses David, what we see in every case is we have someone in authority declaring a person's true purpose and their true identity.

This is who you are, and this is why you're here. This is the purpose of your life. This is the course that your life is meant to take. And because of that, because a blessing speaks to your identity and your purpose, blessings can have tremendous power.

[ 4 : 35 ] They're able to shape and direct the course of someone's entire life. And that is exactly what a blessing is meant to do. It's meant to shape and direct the course of your life.

Now, that is why the Apostle Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians the way he does. Imagine you're the Apostle Paul, and you're sitting in prison in Rome, and you've heard about all of these issues happening in the church that you helped to start in Ephesus.

There is strife. There is personal sin. There is racial tension and division. There's a rise of paganism. There's demonic oppression and spiritual warfare.

And you have one shot to write a letter as their pastor to address all of these issues. How would you begin? This is how Paul begins.

He believes that all of the issues in the Ephesian church are symptoms of the fact that they have forgotten who they truly are and why they are here.

[ 5 : 37 ] So the first half of his letter, he essentially says again and again and again, remember who you are. Remember who you are.

And as we'll see, remember whose you are. And see, every human being has this deep longing for identity and meaning and purpose.

We want to desperately... We're desperate to know why we're here, who we are, what we're meant to become. And the worst possible thing is to have no sense of identity and no sense of purpose.

So we're all searching for it. Some people look for it in their career. A lot of people come to D.C. with an identity that is centered on their career.

But what happens if your job doesn't turn out the way you hoped? What if you get fired? What if you get laid off? Even if it has nothing to do with you, it's not your fault at all.

[ 6 : 38 ] Something like that happens. If your identity is centered in your career, that will threaten your entire sense of self-worth. It's not uncommon to talk to people who have lost their job and they say, I don't know who I am anymore.

I don't know what the purpose of my life is. Why to get out of bed anymore? If you begin to root your identity in your appearance, that works for a while, particularly if you happen to be somewhat attractive.

But you know, that does fade. It will fade. You know, it kind of creeps up on you. If you've centered your identity in your appearance, as that fades, your sense of self and self-worth will begin to fade with it.

Right? If you root your identity, the sense that this is who I truly am in your inner world, how you feel, what you desire, what you'll find is that that inner world is tumultuous.

Your feelings have a tendency to change, not just over years, but maybe over the course of an afternoon. And so what you'll find is that if you're trying to root your identity in your inner feelings and desires, it's like chasing the wind.

[ 7 : 57 ] You're going to have a perpetually insecure and fragile sense of self. That's why people who define themselves this way are constantly looking for external sources of validation to gain that sense of stability.

If you root your sense of identity in your children, what happens when your kids get older? What happens when your children begin to make choices that you don't agree with?

What happens when they make mistakes or do things that you're not proud of? And you begin to wonder, is this reflecting on my parenting? Do people around me think that I'm a bad parent, that I have failed because of the thing that my child did?

If you've rooted your sense of identity in your children, as they get older, as they leave, as you successfully parent them out of your house, I've heard people say, well, now that my kids are gone, I don't know who I am anymore.

I don't know why I'm here. I don't know why I get out of bed. I have no purpose. So in all of these sources of identity, we find they don't work. They don't last. They don't give us that thing that we hope they will.

[ 9 : 06 ] And that's because there's only one place that we can go to figure out the truth about who we really are and why we are really here. There's only one being out there who has the authority to answer those questions in our lives.

And that is the one who authored us. Right? If you want the truly authoritative answer, go to the author, which is God himself. God's blessing means God speaking with ultimate authority into our lives, declaring this is who you truly are, this is why you're here.

And then giving us everything we need to live that out. This is who you are, this is why you're here, and here's everything you need to pursue that. You know, we can spend our lives searching for

identity and purpose.

We can only truly find it in the blessings of God. So that's what a blessing is in the Bible. Now, how does God answer this question of identity and purpose in our lives?

Well, this entire passage that we're looking at this morning, beginning in verse 3, is one long run-on sentence in the Greek. Paul is so filled with things that he wants to say to try to answer this question for us that he just goes on and on and on and on and on.

[ 10 : 24 ] The entire thing is just one long run-on sentence. But what it lacks in grammatical quality, it makes up for in theological depth. It is a staggering statement.

What is God's blessing for us? For everyone who puts their faith in Jesus, there are three things here that are most true about your identity and your purpose. They're more true than whatever you have come to believe about those things in your life.

Number one, verses 4 to 6, Now, if we don't understand what Paul is saying here, it's easy to get caught up with the wrong idea about predestination.

Paul is not talking about this in the context of unbelievers, as though people might come to Jesus and say, I want a relationship. And he says, well, you're not on the list. That's not how it works. The gospel is open to everyone and anyone who comes to Jesus in faith will be saved. Paul is writing this as a pastor trying to encourage his flock. There's a time and a place to get into the theological mysteries of predestination and all of what that means and how it relates to free will.

[ 11 : 51 ] But here, Paul is writing as a pastor and he's trying to encourage his people. And friends, he's writing in a culture of abandonment. This is an abandonment culture.

This is a culture where people would routinely sell wives they didn't want anymore into slavery, where they would routinely get rid of children they didn't want anymore.

There was a trash dump outside the eastern gate of Ephesus, and that's the place where people would take and discard babies that they didn't want. And slavers knew this, and so slavers would frequent that area and they would look for babies healthy enough that they might turn them into slaves, sell them and turn a profit.

It was a culture of abandonment. Some of the Christians that Paul is writing to had probably been abandoned by their birth parents. And the point he's trying to make is that if you're someone who has come to faith in Jesus, that's not by accident.

That's not because of anything you did. Jesus doesn't look at you and say, oh, well, I'm really surprised you made it. Good job. You figured it out. God wanted you.

[ 13 : 04 ] God wanted you. Before he laid the foundations of the earth, he wanted you to belong to him and be part of his family.

He had you in mind. That's the ultimate truth about you. That is more true about you than anything anybody has ever told you.

That first and foremost, you are wanted by name. You're chosen. You belong to him because he wants you. And a lot of problems arise in our lives and in the world because we don't know this. Because instead of living like men and women who have been adopted, we live like orphans. You know, some of us try to cobble together a sense of identity and worth by relying on our careers or our appearance or our children like we said before.

You know, and as long as we have those things, we're okay, but when we lose them, it destroys us. Maybe we feel threatened when we see other people with jobs or looks or families that we don't have and we feel like their success diminishes us.

[ 14 : 14 ] We're living like orphans when we think that way. Some of us care way too much about the approval of other people. We can't handle critical feedback even from people who care about us.

We can't receive hard words in love because we feel so threatened, so diminished. Some of us go around demanding respect. We're living like orphans when we do that, like it's all up to us.

The gospel says you don't have to live like an orphan anymore. You have a father who chose you and you belong to him. God had you personally in mind before he laid the foundations of the earth. He set things in motion so that one day you would come to know him and become part of his family. You have the ultimate security of knowing that you belong to God because he wanted you.

There is no greater security to be found anywhere. And the language of adoption means that you belong to him once and for all. You can fire an employee. You can fire a servant.

[15:16] But once you're adopted, especially under Roman law, an adopted child became in every way indistinguishable from a birth child. So once you're adopted, that's it. You're his forever.

So number one, you've been adopted. That's who you truly are. You're wanted. Number two, you have been redeemed. Verses seven through 10. Now this is one of the most important words in the Bible if you understand the context.

You may already be getting a hint of this. This city of Ephesus was a center of slave trade in this part of the world. A quarter of the population, roughly, somewhere between 20 and 30% of the population were slaves.

So it was a huge, huge business. And the way it would work is that people would go down to the slave market in Ephesus and you would peruse, you would look through and inspect all of the available slaves and you would figure out the ones that you were interested in and then they would go up on the auction block.

And depending on how much interest there was, the price could be driven up higher and higher and higher. And so slaves could be very, very costly. And occasionally, a person might want to free a loved one who was a slave.

[16:29] They might want to free a friend who was enslaved. And in order to do that, you had to pay a price. So you would have to purchase that slave.

You'd have to purchase their freedom. You would purchase them and then you would release them. And that, again, could be very, very expensive. But this act of purchasing a slave in order to set them free, that is the word that the Apostle Paul uses to describe what Jesus Christ has accomplished for us.

And that word is the word redemption. We have been redeemed. Now here's the picture that Paul is painting for us. He's saying the world is like a great slave market.

The entire world is like a great spiritual slave market. We are all slaves to Satan and to sin and to death. And Jesus came into the world because he was looking for you.

He came into the slave market looking for you. And he would not stop until he set you free. And he was willing to pay any price. And the price got higher and higher and higher and higher.

[17:42] And Jesus was willing to pay the ultimate price. And verse 7 tells us the price. We have redemption through his blood. On the cross, Jesus purchased our freedom once and for all.

The highest price ever paid in history to redeem a slave. An infinite price. And you know, if we value things based on the price paid for them, what does that mean about you?

It means you are a being of infinite worth. It means that everyone you meet, it means that everyone sitting around you in this room is infinitely valuable because the God of the universe paid an infinite price for that person.

Again, a lot of problems in our lives arise because we don't know this in our hearts. We forget it.

There was an article in the New Yorker about slavery in the country of Mauritania.

And it's one of the worst places in the world for slavery. Even though it's technically been outlawed, there are still entire communities made up exclusively of slaves.

[18:53] And that's the only life they've ever known. It's the only life their parents have ever known and their grandparents. It's the only reality they've ever known. And there's a quote from one of the people in the article.

Mauritanian slaves are not restrained by chains. Slavery is a psychological institution. They interview people who try to escape.

This one boy tries to escape. His mother says, what are you doing? I want to escape slavery. Why? Who do you think you are? You're a slave.

Why would you leave? Another former child slave said to the interviewer, to the slave, his identity is his master. His identity is his master.

He believes, she believes that they are slaves. Therefore, they are. Setting a person like that free requires much more than simply throwing open the door and saying, go build a life for yourself.

[20:01] They need their identity to be rebuilt from the ground up. with every brick being a new brick. You are no longer a slave. You are free.

You have been redeemed. And only when they begin to see themselves as free will they begin to live as free people. And that's not unlike how the apostle Paul sees sin in the lives of Christians.

When we disobey God, Paul doesn't say, oh, you're breaking the rules. Stop breaking the rules. Shape up or ship out. He recognizes what's actually happening.

He says, you're going back to your old master. You're allowing that old identity to be your master. And he continually appeals to us as he does in this letter to put off that old self.

Be renewed by the spirit of your mind and put on the new self that you've gained in Christ, the one that has been redeemed and set free. Remember who you are. Remember who you are.

[ 21 : 01 ] Remember who you are. It's like a drumbeat throughout this letter. So he says, remember who you are. You've been adopted. You've been redeemed. And then number three, the third thing that we see here.

You have been sealed. Now what does that mean? In the Roman world, if you were a soldier, you had a tattoo. If you were a slave, you had a brand. These were marks of ownership that told everyone around you who you belong to.

And virtually everyone belonged to someone. And Paul says, God has put his mark on you. He adopted you, he redeemed you, and now he's put his mark of ownership on you.

It's not a visible mark. It's the gift of the Holy Spirit. You have been given the Holy Spirit which is a sign and a seal of who you truly are and whose you truly are.

And the Holy Spirit guarantees not only that we belong to God, but it guarantees and it reminds everyone in the world, including us, that we have an inheritance to come.

[ 22 : 06 ] He says in verse 3, God has given us every spiritual blessing. He doesn't just give us just enough to get by. He's given us every spiritual blessing. There's nothing he has to give us that he has not entrusted to us.

He holds nothing back. And verse 14 says, the Holy Spirit is like a down payment of that. It's a guarantee of the full payment to come at the end of all time.

It's a guarantee that one day at the end of all time we will receive the full inheritance that has been set aside for us. And that inheritance is the promise that one day God will restore all things.

The heavens and the earth will be joined together and we will live with him as one community, one community.