

Blessed to overflowing

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[0 : 00] Our reading this evening is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Letter to the Ephesians, we're going to be reading chapter 1 and the first 14 verses.

So Ephesians chapter 1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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, for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Christ Jesus, in accordance with his pleasure and will, to the praise of his glorious 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, that he lavished on us.

[1 : 24] With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will, 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.

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 put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of the truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him 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.

Amen. I wonder how you would say God has blessed you.

I hope we would each have different answers to that question, how has God blessed you. I hope we can all look back on ways that God has been good to us in the past, both the recent past and longer ago.

[2 : 51] I hope you can point to particular blessings. Maybe that would be a good exercise for you, something to sit down and mull over with a cup of tea when you've got a quiet morning sometime this week or to talk over as a family over supper tonight.

We've all seen, haven't we, the stereotypical Thanksgiving dinner with the American family kind of going around the table saying something that they're thankful for. It often strikes me as quite an odd exercise because so often there's nothing said in that context of to whom they are thankful.

I don't think, properly speaking, you can be thankful in the abstract. There's necessarily someone being thanked. Well, I suspect in most Thanksgiving dinners nowadays, no one has the faintest idea who could possibly be thanked.

Folks, I hope you know who should rightly be thanked. Verse 3 identifies the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as the source of all spiritual blessing.

I hope you have those particular blessings to be thankful for. But even if you can't think of kind of individual personal examples, well, there are plenty of blessings that are common to all those who can be rightly addressed in the terms of verse 1 as God's holy people, whether in Ephesus or in Darval.

[4 : 08] Paul identifies in this opening section of his letter a plethora of blessings that are all common to every believer. We've thought already about the blessing of being chosen in Christ.

That was our theme last Sunday, and you can catch up on the Facebook page if you missed that. Today we're turning to a few of the less dominant themes that constitute kind of further outworkings of the comprehensive spiritual blessing that God has lavished upon his people.

So in this category tonight, we're going to look first at adoption. That comes up in verse 5. Second, turn to forgiveness and redemption, verse 7.

And third, revelation in verse 9. And finally, sealing with the Holy Spirit, verse 13. Adoption, redemption, revelation, and sealing with the Spirit.

All of these blessings are ours in Christ Jesus. Now these are all important themes. Any of them could easily be the theme of not just one, but several sermons.

[5 : 15] But to cover them all, we are going to be necessarily relatively brief. But happily, Paul's going to return later on in the letter to these themes that he's introducing here. So first up, adoption.

Now remember, Paul wrote this whole section of his letter as one long sentence, which does mean it's sometimes slightly tricky to work out how different words and different thoughts relate to one another as we go through.

But most commentators and translators are agreed the last two words of verse 4 belong with the thought of verse 5. So, in love, he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will.

As we think about adoption, let's deal first with the statement to sonship, because this is both potentially misleading and really important. So it's worth us taking a look at. What I guess could perhaps be confusing is that 50% of you could well be looking at this and saying, well, I cannot possibly be adopted as a son.

But folks, I want to be perfectly clear. This absolutely does apply to all of God's people. It is not the case that men are adopted by God and women sort of get an indirect link through marriage or kinship.

[6 : 32] No. No, your connection to God is not remote or indirect. In fact, Paul's saying precisely the opposite of that. He's saying we are adopted into a relationship.

Men and women alike are accounted sons. The term that Paul uses here in this sentence is not a gendered term, which perhaps leaves us wondering why it's translated to sonship rather than, say, adopted as sons and daughters or just adopted without further qualification.

Well, that's because of the significance of being adopted as a son in first century Greco-Roman society. See, today we kind of take it for granted, I suppose, that sons and daughters are treated equally by their parents.

It would be unusual now for an inheritance to be divided so as to substantially favor the sons over the daughters. But that's not the case in Greek society.

Only the sons, and really only the firstborn son, inherits the estate. In fact, that's basically the whole purpose of adoption. It's not so much adoption of social care as sound estate planning.

[7 : 48] It might well be an adult who's adopted, not a child. And God adopts all of us into this honored relationship. This is entry into a privileged position.

And God offers it to us all because we are all united to his son, Jesus Christ. Stott says, when people ask us the speculative question, why God went ahead with the creation when he knew it was going to be followed by the fall, one answer we can tentatively give is that he destined us for a higher dignity than even creation would bestow upon us.

He intended to adopt us, to make us the sons and daughters of his family. Folks, we talk, don't we, about God's love.

It's not an abstract concept. God's love is revealed to us in these terms as God chooses a relationship with his people.

This is not a mechanical, legal process like the green card marriages, so beloved of romantic comedies. Now remember those first two words.

[9 : 02] The end of verse four, in love. And the same theme resonates at the end of verse six. Do you notice there, this grace is given us in the one he loves.

Now on one level, this is just a recurrence of the theme of being in Christ that echoes through the whole way through this section and indeed the first three chapters more broadly.

But you see how here, Paul tweaks that phrase, not just in him or in Christ. This isn't wooden repetition, but rather here, the same point and more is conveyed by the choice of the phrase, in the one he loves.

Because the father loves his son, then he chooses to adopt more and more in and through him. This is the kind of love we're talking about.

That's the reality of God's love for you. Brothers and sisters, God is choosing to create a family. And God has chosen you to be part of it.

[10:06] So if you feel alienated in society, if you feel lonely, if you are far away from family, if you have few, if any, living relatives, if you've never had the spouse or the children that you've longed for, well know this.

You are adopted sons of the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not because of anything in you, but rather to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the one he loves. And this is not some legal fiction. This is not massaging the official record to say something that's not actually true.

No, we are genuinely, truly, and fully adopted. And that's possible because, verse 7, we are redeemed. We are forgiven. Those of us who are adopted into God's family can say, in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.

Redemption's about liberation. It's about freedom from bondage. And for Paul, this language seems to be rooted back in the Old Testament, in the redemption of God's people from bondage in Egypt.

[11:24] It's language about the release of slaves. In Christ, the whole of the Old Testament is fulfilled. The whole of it. Not just the prophecies of the Messiah, but rather all of the types, the shadows, the forerunners who prefigure Jesus.

So in Exodus 7, we hear that Moses was God to Pharaoh. Moses deals with the king of Egypt, who stands opposed to the king of kings. And because Moses deals with him, he redeems the people of Israel from death and slavery.

Well, so too Christ deals with Satan. Satan, who is otherwise our ruler, as Paul's going to discuss in 2.2. And Jesus leads his people into freedom.

He redeems us. And redemption means a transfer of lordship. It means a move from one kingdom to another. And again, Paul's going to come back to that later in the letter.

But we have to ask, don't we, how this redemption is achieved? Because a redemption could be just a stronger king going and taking captives from the weaker. And I suppose on one level, this is that.

[12:35] But what Paul says here is, redemption is through his, that is through Christ's blood. Again, he's drawing on the language of the slave market. There's a price to be paid.

It's expressed just in embryonic form here. But this is clearly, obviously, a reference to Christ's violent death on the cross, as Paul spells out more fully in other places.

Romans 3.25, for instance. Which sort of causes us to ask why blood is an appropriate price for our redemption, doesn't it? But the answer to that comes in the second half of the phrase.

We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. Without Jesus coming and shedding his blood on our behalf, we're liable to pay the price ourselves.

But wonderfully, that price really has been paid. Again, this isn't a legal fiction. This isn't a pretense that our sin is gone. This isn't a claiming that the price has been paid.

[13:40] No, it truly actually has been paid for. The price is paid, and therefore, there isn't any more debt. This isn't sort of a pause on loan repayments that could be reactivated at any time.

This isn't the friend who says they've forgiven you, but then actually keeps bringing it up every now and then when they're angry and want you to make you pay for what you did. No. The debt's gone. There's nothing that can be pointed to to say there's more to pay. The price has been paid. And all of this is essential to us, and all of it is interlinked.

After all, you were dead in your trespasses and sin, as Paul's going to say in 2.1. Folks, you cannot be adopted into a relationship while you are dead. You must also be made alive.

You cannot have any kind of relationship with the Father unless your sins are forgiven. But wonderfully in Christ, you are redeemed, forgiven, and adopted.

[14:48] Third, Revelation. Verse 9, He made known to us the mystery of His will. In some ways, this is a very simple point, but it is important to say that God intends us to understand His saving purposes.

We kind of take for granted, don't we, not only that we have access to a plethora of English translations of God's Word, which historically is an innovation, but perhaps even more

fundamentally, we take it for granted that the Bible exists at all.

God didn't have to reveal Himself. God didn't have to give us this permanent record of His character and actions. God could have stayed alive, but He chose instead to reveal Himself in His Word and supremely in the person of His Son to make Himself known to us.

Thus, that which was once a mystery is now made known. The word mystery is often used in all kinds of pagan cults in philosophy, and especially in the early church heresy of Gnosticism that declares this secret knowledge that's known only to a few.

But in contrast to that, Paul says, the mystery has been made known. See, Christianity doesn't have an inner circle who know the real truth.

[16:12] Dan Brown can write his novels if he likes. It's not based on reality. The church doesn't have a favored elite who are party to more information. There isn't more truth to be made known than has been made known.

Everything there is, it is here for you. There's no one who has access to more knowledge, so it ought to be the case that there's no elite of any kind.

Now, of course, the fact that the knowledge is there to be had doesn't mean we all of us know and understand it equally. It's wise for us to be willing to defer in most cases to those who've spent more time in study and more able to draw to mind how the different parts of Scripture relate to one another and so on.

It's wise to feast on the wisdom that others have, but that doesn't mean that each and every one of us cannot see and understand what God is saying.

I will remember the lecture in which the teacher, he was speaking about the core responsibilities of being the pastor and he referred a number of times through it to Acts chapter 6 verse 4, telling us to devote ourselves to the ministry of the word and to prayer.

[17:23] Now, what was really encouraging was seeing how he responded to one of the other students when after the third or fourth time of being told to devote himself to the ministry of word and to prayer, the student put his hand up and said, excuse me, is it not prayer and the ministry of the word?

Of course, the student was right. It was great to see how humbly the lecturer responded to that. It's not a radical shift. It doesn't matter greatly. What he was saying wasn't wrong, but there someone with far less experience was able to see something important in the text that he had overlooked. It's not unusual that teenagers at the youth group point out a nuance of the passage we're looking at that I haven't previously considered. It's a good thing. God's knowledge is here for us.

The mystery is revealed to us all. The mystery is revealed you can understand God's will. It's here for you. It's plain. It's comprehensible. Now, the particular aspect of the revelation of the mystery that Paul seems to want to bring out here is the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's saving purpose. That inclusion certainly is much more plain after Christ's coming than it was before. Do you see there at the end of verse 10? God's will is to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

[18:46] Again, more on that as we continue through the letter. The mystery has been revealed. This was God's will all along just as we were considering looking at Mark's gospel in the Connect groups this week.

Watching Mark drawing on the Old Testament to explain who Jesus is. God's will is revealed to us in Christ. Fourthly, the final point not only for this sermon but the final point for our consideration of these verses.

I promise there is not a yet a fourth sermon to come on this one passage. Paul says in the second half of verse 13, when you believed you were marked in him 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.

There's two images for us to unpack in these couple of verses. First, Paul refers to the Spirit as a seal and second as a deposit.

Now, the image of a seal is not here so much the blob of wax on the letter as this is the seal of the branding of cattle or even of slaves.

[19:59] this actually isn't a mark so much of authenticity as a mark of ownership. God says this is mine and no one can claim otherwise.

His property is guarded against theft. Now, I suspect you and I perhaps are not especially wild about the idea of being counted as property.

We have, after all, been raised to believe that slavery is a bad thing, capital B, capital T. but the Bible's position is consistently you will either belong to one master or the other.

Freedom's not all it's cracked up to be. We look for freedom to do what we want, freedom to be who we want to be, freedom to act however we please and where does it get us? So often we get messed up as we define freedom on our terms because it turns out that freedom is actually living under another lordship, that of the master of lies.

And what we find when we follow him is that freedom isn't free at all. We find that other people have power over us. We find that our own worst impulses have power over us.

[21 : 18] We find that our circumstances aren't under our control. We're powerless and we resent the experiences that that imposes on us. The truth is if you want to be free you must enslave yourself to the one in whose service perfect freedom is found.

Maybe it seems counterintuitive but Jesus said in Matthew 11 take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

The Holy Spirit is a seal. God in Christ claiming us as his own precious possession and that is a really really good thing.

Second Paul says the Spirit is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance. Now we're back to some extent to the idea of adoption aren't we?

Adoption is about inheritance and in case there's any doubt whether we really are adopted whether we really will receive our inheritance. If there's any doubt well we're provided with this guarantee the Holy Spirit within us.

[22 : 34] Stott helpfully points out this word araban this guarantee here this word is used in modern Greek to refer to an engagement ring but that's not how it's being used here.

This is more commercial language rather than interrelational which maybe sounds at odds with adoption as a loving family relationship.

Maybe we quite like the image of an engagement ring but that's not what Paul's talking about here. And the thing is yes an engagement ring promises marriage but an engagement ring isn't part of the marriage.

A deposit on a house or a deposit in your higher purchase agreement that's more than a guarantee of payment isn't it? That deposit is itself the first installment of the payment.

Well that's what's going on with the Holy Spirit here. In giving us the Holy Spirit God isn't just promising us our final inheritance though he is doing that.

[23 : 36] He's not just doing that he's actually giving us a foretaste of it. He's giving us the first installment of our coming inheritance. And even the riches of that foretaste wonderful as they are even they are but a small fraction of the future endowments.

Folks the fullness of our inheritance is yet to come. And that inheritance will be glorious beyond our imagination. But it's also true that we have already begun to receive it.

all of these things adoption redemption revelation sealing all of them are true of all those who verse one are God's holy people.

Verse 13 here is clear receiving God's spirit is not a second stage no it was when you believed then right then you received the spirits. in Christ we are adopted as God's beloved sons.

In Christ our sins are forgiven and we are redeemed. In Christ the mystery of God's will is revealed to us. In Christ we were included and therefore sealed with the Holy Spirit.

[24 : 57] And all of it to the praise of God's glory. Let's pray. Lord our God indeed we praise you for your rich blessings that you have lavished upon us.

We rejoice in our adoption our redemption your revelation and our inclusion in Christ our sealing with your Holy Spirit.

Lord our God what riches there are in these blessings beyond our understanding beyond what we've been able to consider this evening.

How much you have given to us. How much we have yet to learn. How much yet to discover and appreciate. And how many more blessings yet to come.

As we have just the foretaste of our inheritance. Lord we thank you for the confidence we can have that the fullness will come.

[26 : 04] Lord we look forward to that day and we thank you for your goodness and your grace to us here and now. In Christ's name.

Amen.