

Facing death with Christ

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Preacher: Clive Broadbent

[0 : 00] Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace with which he has blessed us in the beloved.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of his will according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things, according to the counsel of his will, so that we who are the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

[1 : 37] In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance, until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Well this is the start of a new series of talks in Ephesians. You'll see if you have a look at chapter 1, verse 1, it's a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus, possibly to other churches as well in the surrounding areas on the west coast of what is now Turkey.

It was the second most important city in the Roman Empire, and perhaps some of us, has anyone been to Ephesus? Some of us perhaps have been there on holiday, yep, John and Helen have been there.

And the heart of the letter is chapter 1, verse 10. It is God's plan to sum up and unite everything under the Lord Jesus Christ. Just have a look at chapter 1, verse 10.

To unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. It's why I've given this series of talks the title, Something Greater to Live For.

[2 : 52] Because the fact is, of course, that all of us are living for something. It may be exams and academic success, it may be sport or music, it may be our job or career advancements, it may be our family, our friends, our social life, or perhaps we just live for the next holiday, just kind of go from one holiday, living for the next one.

Or it may be that you're just kind of plodding along in life, and if the truth be told, you don't really give much thought to what you do live for. Or perhaps life is such a sort of constant whirl of activity and fun, that actually you never stop to ask the question, what am I living for?

All of us can sing along to the songs in Mamma Mia, Here We Go Again, and feel good about the world, but actually at some point, we do have to stop and ask the question, what am I actually living for?

And of course, hot on the heels of that question, is the related question, am I actually living for the right thing? I take it they're questions all of us need to ask, those of us who are here looking on the Christian faith, as well as those of us who would consider ourselves to be disciples of the Lord Jesus.

And of course, September is a great time to ask the question, isn't it? You know, the sun is behind us, we're looking forward, at least probably to Christmas over the next few months, many of us, I guess, thinking about what the whole of the next year has in store for us.

[4 : 25] And it's what Ephesians is about, God's big plan for the world. This is the greater thing, God's big plan for the world, the greater thing, that actually the Lord Jesus wants us all to be living for, to be transformed by, and have our focus on.

Now, in the original Greek, all of verses 3 to 14, is actually one long sentence. I was disappointed that Fiona breathed in the middle of the reading, several times breathed, perhaps that's something you can do when you're back at home, see if you can say it all in one breath.

There's a lot here, isn't there? So what we're going to do today is we're simply going to focus on verses 1 to 10, with the aim of rejoicing, as the Apostle Paul rejoices. And then next week, we're going to look at verses 11 to 14, which will also, because it's a smaller passage, give us time to ask the question, why?

Why was Ephesians written? Why did the church at Ephesus need to hear this message? And why is it so vital for us in London today?

So today, verses 3 to 10, and the headline is verse 3. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ, with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

[5 : 49] If I put my trust in Jesus, or to use the language of Jesus Christ himself, if I'm born again, or if I'm to use the language of the Apostle Paul, if I'm in Christ, then I have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Every spiritual blessing. The expression means every kind of spiritual blessing, which will be unpacked for us in verses 4 to 10. Every spiritual blessing in the, well, it's every spiritual blessing, which doesn't mean that they are sort of airy-fairy.

I don't know what you think of when you think of spiritual blessings. Perhaps you think of something which is kind of airy-fairy, intangible, difficult to pin down, slightly irrelevant perhaps, in the kind of day-to-day business of real life.

But actually, spiritual blessing, it doesn't mean that. It means something that is permanent. In other words, just as real as the blessings of holidays, or family, or a job that we enjoy.

But of course, unlike all those things, which will pass away, these blessings are permanent, because they are spiritual. And notice too, they're in the heavenly places, the unseen world of spiritual reality.

[7 : 02] Which means, of course, those of us who belong to Jesus, we have them now, but we can't fully experience them now. We don't fully see them now, but we will do in the new creation.

Now, I don't know about you, but it seems to me that verse three should have us right on the edge of our seats, once we've grasped what the Apostle Paul is saying. And to be saying, what are these blessings?

Well, they're on the outline. And you'll see from the headings on the outline that they relate to the past, the present, and the future. So first of all, the blessing of adoption from all eternity.

Verse four, In other words, go back in time, go back in time before the foundation of the world, before God said, before we were told in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Go back to that time, and what was God doing? Well, he was making choices, choosing a people who would belong to him as his set apart people, who would stand before him on the final day of history, holy and blameless, serving him around the heavenly throne.

[8 : 31] In other words, the Garden of Eden in Genesis chapter three was never God's ultimate goal. I think it's easy to think that, that if only sin hadn't entered into the world, then we'd all be living in the Garden of Eden.

But no, God's purpose has always been to have a chosen people who would stand before him in the new creation. In the Old Testament, God chose Abraham to bless him and as the means by which he would be a blessing to the nations.

Subsequently, he chose the nation of Israel out of all the nations of the world to be his special chosen people, his treasured possession. It was his sovereign choice. It had nothing to do with their merit, nothing to do with their behavior, and God is still in the business of choosing people to be his people.

End of verse four. In love, he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will. Now, I'm conscious that some of us, as soon as we hear the word predestination, why the hairs on the back of our neck just begin to bristle.

But can I say that if our reaction to predestination is, oh no, not that again, then actually we do just need to stop and pause because that is very different and very far from understanding it in the way

that God intends.

[9 : 58] In the words of John Stott, predestination is without question a biblical doctrine and no biblical Christian can ignore it. So, although, of course, predestination may produce some hard thinking and some head scratching, it should ultimately produce praise.

After all, this whole paragraph, Ephesians 1, 1 to 10, is full of praise and there was something amiss in our understanding of predestination if it doesn't produce praise.

So, notice, will you, it's not just that God foreknows those who will trust in Jesus and so makes his decisions about us on the basis of who he knows will trust in Jesus.

No, it's that he actively chooses who will belong to his people. Nor does it mean that people don't personally have to respond to the gospel in repentance and faith.

In other words, in response to the obvious objection, but hang on a moment, didn't I choose God?

Well, the reply is, yes, of course you did, but only because in eternity he chose you first.

[11 : 13] You see, the purpose of predestination is to give us assurance and confidence because to say that election took place before creation shows that God's choice was due to his free decision and love and not dependent on our merit or anything good in us.

Now, just think about that for a moment because, of course, that is a marvelously and wonderfully liberating thing. After all, we all know, don't we, what it is to be chosen, perhaps from an early age, to be chosen to play in an orchestra or a sports team or perhaps at work to be chosen for promotion or perhaps by friends to be chosen to share a special occasion.

It feels good and yet, doesn't it also feel precarious? I mean, if I don't perform well enough, if I don't live up to people's expectations, will I be chosen again?

which is why verse 6, God's grace is indeed glorious. It's glorious that God's choice of his people does not depend on our merit, worth, or performance, but simply on God's gracious decision.

That is a glorious thing. And those he chooses, notice, are chosen, verse 5, for adoption in the Roman world. It was common practice to adopt a child who wasn't part of a family by birth.

[12 : 52] But wonderfully, of course, at the moment of adoption, that is the point where they would then receive all the blessings of being part of the family, how much more those who are in Christ.

And that, of course, means that for everyone in this room, for everyone who belongs to Jesus, they can say, chosen by God, before the foundation of the world, predestined for adoption through Jesus Christ.

Kyloch, chosen before the foundation of the world. Lucy, chosen for adoption, predestined through Jesus Christ.

And all of us, those of us who have put our trust in Jesus, all of us can say that. Isn't that a wonderful thing? A glorious thing? something to praise God for. Second, the blessing of forgiveness in the present, verses 7 to 8.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight.

[14 : 08] Perhaps you've been to a theme park like Alton Towers or Disneyland, and you know how it is, you kind of queue to get through the entrance gate or kind of shuffling slowly along the queue along with everyone else. But once you're through the gateway, then at that point suddenly you have access to everything that is there in the park open for you.

Well similarly the gateway if you like to all of God's blessings is what the Apostle Paul simply refers to as his blood. the blood of Jesus.

The word speaks of his costly sacrifice and violent death. And while we'll see much more about why Jesus' death was necessary in chapter 2, nonetheless the summary achievement of his death is there for us in verse 7.

It is the forgiveness of our trespasses, the forgiveness of sins. Just as in the Old Testament, the great moment of redemption, redemption was the rescue of God's people from slavery in Egypt and from the judgment of God.

So now the far bigger redemption, indeed the great rescue of the whole Bible story, is that achieved by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

[15 : 26] From slavery to sin, from the just and right judgment of a holy God. God's God's God's love. And it is that the gateway which opens up all the other blessings of this passage for those who belong to Jesus.

It's no wonder is it the apostle Paul is overflowing with praise and thanksgiving. for the riches of God's grace, his free gift, lavished, poured out upon his people.

And notice will you how throughout the passage these blessings come only to those who are in Christ. Did you notice that refrain as Fiona read the passage for us earlier?

All these blessings come to those who are in Christ. Christ. So verse three, who has blessed us in Christ. Verse four, even as he chose us in him.

Verse five, for adoption through Jesus Christ. Verse six, he has blessed us in the beloved. Verse seven, in him we have redemption. Verse ten, to unite all things in him.

[16:40] Verse eleven, in him we've obtained an inheritance. Verse twelve, we who were the first to hope in Christ. And verse thirteen, in him.

In other words, if you and I are ever tempted to imagine that we can experience the blessings of the forgiveness of sins and being adopted by God to be part of his people, to be gathered on that future day around the heavenly throne and to experience those blessings apart from being in Christ, then we are mistaken.

I guess there are very many reasons why we might think like that. Indeed, they're common reasons in our culture. So people think they can experience the blessings of forgiveness simply because they go to church or are baptized.

I was having a conversation with someone back in the spring and they were very offended at the thought that their church going alone would not make them part of God's people.

Others think they, others regard themselves as part of God's people simply because they are decent and upright. others because they assume God will forgive everyone.

[17:52] It's what he does, that everyone will be gathered around the heavenly throne. Still others that the different faiths are like different paths up a mountain. It doesn't really matter which path you take because actually they all get to the same destination eventually.

That is completely the opposite of genuine biblical Christianity. These great blessings only come to those who are in Christ, who have been united to him.

So may I ask, are you? Are you in Christ? I mean it's the obvious question to ask isn't it? Have you been united to him by trusting in his death on the cross for your sin?

Not simply in other words, do you have faith? Do you have a faith? Or do you come to church? But actually do you belong to Jesus? Are you in Christ?

Now maybe that you're here and that you don't. Or that perhaps it's just dawning upon you perhaps even for the first time that you don't. In which case I'd love to chat to you afterwards or chat to a Christian friend afterwards about how you might belong to Jesus as his people.

[19:13] So first of all the blessing of adoption from all eternity. Secondly the blessing of forgiveness in the present. Then thirdly the blessing of knowledge about the future.

Have a look at verses 9 and 10. making known to us the mystery of his will according to his purpose which he sets before set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him things in heaven and things on earth.

I don't know about you but it seems to me that after everything we've seen so far these verses might feel like something of an anticlimax. After all coming to know something doesn't feel particularly exciting does it?

But actually this is the crowning glory verse 10 not only of our passage but actually it is the crowning glory of the whole letter. This is the heart of God's plan for his world.

It's something that's been a mystery as Paul says by which he doesn't mean it's been weird or spooky but simply that it was hidden but now it has been revealed in Christ.

[20:27] God's plan for a whole recreated world. Because of course you and I only need to look at the news headlines or perhaps just think about a typical day at work or at school or at home and it's obvious isn't it that our world is far from united.

We live in a divided united kingdom. a quarrelsome European union. The United Nations is far from united.

The United States perhaps less united than it's been at any time in its history or at least in the last 170 years. But unlike this current creation that we live in a world disordered and torn apart by sin and rebellion God's ultimate purpose the direction of history is a whole reordered creation centered on and reunited in Jesus Christ.

Our disintegrated universe will be reintegrated. This kind of broken jigsaw of the world in which we live will be put back together again.

in other words history is not simply a kind of a random series of events nor is it simply the history of human progress.

[21 : 57] Rather it is moving towards a glorious goal God's goal of uniting everything under the Lord Jesus when everyone will have to recognize that he is indeed Lord and King.

Which means of course that if we belong to Jesus we've been given the most extraordinary gift of knowing the ultimate truth about eternity ultimate truth about the direction of travel that our world is going in.

Perhaps you've had the experience as I have of being on a train and it's kind of slowly dawned on you that actually you weren't going past any of the familiar landmarks you were expecting to go past and you finally summed up to do the very un-British thing and talk to someone else on the train and you ask them the very un-British question can you tell me where this train is going at which point everyone else in the carriage is suddenly listening to the conversation and you feel a complete idiot only to discover the train is going it really is going in completely the opposite direction to the one you thought it was going in now of course that is inconvenient and embarrassing when you're on a train to not know where it's heading but actually it is a complete disaster to live in the world and not know where it's heading and not to know where it's going and yet sadly so many do perhaps even some of us here this morning which only highlights doesn't it what a wonderful blessing this third blessing is for God to tell us the direction the whole world is heading in to unite all things under Christ well it is a terrific start to the letter a friend of mine recently came back from holiday and he described the beautiful city he has been to with his family he said to me they've got it all well the fact is of course that without Jesus all they have is temporal blessings and one day even in a city where you might feel you have it all one day you'll have nothing but if we've put our trust in Christ we really do have it all the blessing of adoption from all eternity the blessing of forgiveness in the present the blessing of knowledge about the future the apostle Paul wants us to count our blessings to rejoice in them now I take it that at the very least that should have an impact on our singing on a Sunday week by week we have much to rejoice in let's make sure at the very least it's reflected in the way that we sing and seek to encourage each other about God's blessings when we sing but strikingly although the apostle Paul will talk about singing later on in the letter actually that is not the primary application of the letter let me finish by giving us a spoiler alert a heads up of what the primary application is going to be which we'll think much more about next week it's there in chapter 3 verse 13 chapter 3 verse 13 so I ask you not to lose heart over what I'm suffering for you which is your glory the apostle Paul is in prison the work of the gospel looks unimpressive as we'll see next week the Christians in Ephesus had every reason humanly speaking to be intimidated by the world around them and so to give themselves and invest themselves in other things apart from serving the Lord

[25 : 58] Jesus at one level in other words at one level to believe the gospel but actually for their lives not really to be transformed by the gospel and shaped by the gospel it comes back to the question that we started with what are we living for perhaps actually if we're honest some of us have lost heart because the work of the gospel looks small and unimpressive and insignificant and it looks as if there are other things in our lives which actually feel so much more impressive and worth investing ourselves in instead and that is why the letter then finishes as it does flick on to chapter 6 chapter 6 verse 10 this is the flip side of the do not lose heart application this is the positive chapter 6 verse 10 finally be strong in the

Lord and in the strength of his might and verse 13 stand firm and beginning of verse 14 stand therefore don't lose heart stand firm as a follower of Jesus that is what Ephesians will enable us to do let's have a few moments of reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer bless be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places heavenly father we praise you for your very great kindness we praise you for these wonderful blessings for all those who are in Christ for the blessing of adoption the blessing of forgiveness the blessing of knowing the whole direction of history and we pray heavenly father for your mercy on us that we be transformed by these glorious truths that we would not lose heart as we seek to follow the

Lord Jesus this week that we would be those who stand firm confident in these blessings confidence in the future direction of our world and we ask it in Jesus name Amen