

Blessed in Christ Beyond Compare

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[0 : 0 0] To keep your Bibles open to Ephesians. And yeah, we'll work through this and hopefully get to the end in one year. We will, we will.

Now one of the things I look forward to when I travel, which is not very often, is to discover after checking into a hotel, what perks I didn't realise I had when I first booked the hotel.

That too doesn't happen very often, the perks. But once in a while, the hotel staff might inform me that actually there's a free breakfast that comes with the room.

And not just cornflakes and cereals, but a hot breakfast. Or that I have full access to the gym or the pool for no extra money. Sometimes even the very small perks, like having a bit of credit that you could use at the bar, not that I drink at all, are a welcome surprise.

Of course, the best perk is to get that upgrade, that's right, to the sweet. Which sadly never happens to me. Never happened yet, hopefully.

[1 : 1 4] Now, I think the same thing happens when we become a Christian. Often we may believe the good news of Jesus for a specific reason, specific to us, like wanting to have our sins forgiven, or being attracted to the hope that Jesus gives, or eternal life, or for some, just simply finding belonging in the body of Christ.

But then we soon discover, as we continue in the Christian walk, that there is just so much more. That when we read God's word, we become aware of, as it were, many more spiritual perks.

And indeed, that's what Paul announces at the start of this letter. And so, you know, the big idea here really is in verse 3. We are blessed in Christ beyond compare.

Regardless of what drew you into Christianity in the first place, there's just so much more to enjoy. Not just in this life, but for eternity.

And so Paul, after he greets God's holy people in Ephesus, in verse 1 and 2, he proclaims exactly that in verse 3. 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.

[2 : 3 2] Paul's big idea is therefore expressed in the form of praise. Praise to God, or literally, blessed be God, because all the blessings we have come from God.

For even though we have a part to play, so yes, we do have to believe, we have to put our hope in God, God is actually the cause of all our blessings. He alone is responsible for them.

And when we read through the passage, it's very clear that he's the one that gives, that lavishes, that predetermines. It's all God's work, all God's initiative.

And so the praise rightly falls on God, who is revealed to us as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God we know from the Old and New Testament. Then Paul gives us the scope of the blessings, which is very comprehensive.

Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms. Paul is not talking about earthly blessings that we humans commonly want, of good health, worldly wealth or status.

[3 : 41] No. So much better is on offer here. Because the reference to heavenly realms speak of things which transcend time and space. Blessings which will extend beyond our physical life.

Even though, of course, we enjoy much of it in this life. And they are spiritual in nature, because they are enabled by the gift and presence of God's Spirit in our lives.

We'll see more of that in the letter later on. But third, all of these blessings are ours in Christ. And these two words, in Christ or in Him, throughout the passage, repeated quite often, is the singular condition for these blessings.

We are blessed only in Christ. Now in simple terms, that just means you need to be a Christian. But being in Christ here is a phrase that is rich in meaning and significance.

Because it conveys to us that all our spiritual blessings are secured for us by Christ, by Jesus. Only when we lean on Him and what He's done for us, are we given these blessings to enjoy.

[4 : 55] And second, the Father gives them to us through His Son. They vest in Him, if you like. So you can't separate the blessings from Jesus. You know, you can't say, Thank you, I'll just have the blessings.

But Jesus, well, don't really want Him as Lord. You can't say that. They are ours only when we are part of Him, part of His body. So we have to remain in Christ.

And God's blessings will continue to be given to us through Him, while we remain in Him. So this is really the big idea in a nutshell, but it's a theme that will run through strongly through the entire letter.

But having set the scene to how amazing God's gifts to us are, Paul now delves into the specifics to demonstrate why his exuberant praise for God is justified.

Now, incidentally, this entire passage here from verse 3 to 14 is really one long sentence. It's almost like Paul gets so carried away by the praise that he only draws breath when he gets to verse 14.

[6 : 10] And notice now that as I begin to read, Paul covers the length of eternity. From before the creation of this world to the very end of this age.

Friends, we're not just blessed from birth to death in our life, great as that would be. No, God's blessing to us began from before time.

Before even a single day came to pass. Before there were stars in the sky. We were part of God's plan. Praise be to God, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

For, verse 4, He chose us in Him, that's Christ, before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He 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 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.

[7 : 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.

Now, I've read it all together because it is a really densely packed passage, isn't it? And I could almost spend 30 minutes on each phrase alone and we'll be here till midnight.

But since that's not the time that we have, I want to encourage you actually, instead to take this home with you, maybe take the outline home, and meditate on this passage over the coming week.

Take each bullet point in my outline, break it down further if you want, and just reflect and praise and pray over each one through the week. Really savor it.

It's a bit like a box of fine chocolates. Sometimes you get them or you buy them yourself. And when you first get them and you open them, you go, wow, what a beautiful selection.

[8 : 31] But then, the best way to eat them, to enjoy them, is actually to savor them, isn't it? One by one. Not all in one go, like, you know, salted caramel, chili, whatever, Turkish delight. No. Slowly. One at a time. So, I want to encourage you to do that through the week. This is a rich passage and you want to just savor each phrase one at a time and then hopefully, praise God for it.

But for tonight, we're just going to unwrap the chocolate box, as it were. And as I said, Paul starts at the very beginning, not with each of our births, but from before time began.

For that is when God chose us. And over and over, we hear of predestination, verse 5, of God's working things out according to His will, verse 5 and 9, to bring things according to His plan to fulfillment, verse 10.

It's very, very hard, if not impossible, to escape God's sovereignty, isn't it, in the passage. God is in control.

[9 : 44] He's the master of history. And not just a master in the sense that He's here and now trying to pull the strings and, you know, as history unfolds, make sure everything doesn't fall apart. No, He's the master of history by working everything out from the very beginning and then ensuring that it unfolds according to His plan.

Now, it doesn't mean then that every one of us are just robots on autopilot because we are still humans with agency and we're responsible for making choices.

But even so, God is able to work everything out according to His plan. But more importantly, God chose us with the end in mind. You see that?

To be made holy and blameless in His sight. And God's goal for us is assured, isn't it? Because of His sovereignty.

We're not like some, you know, contestant. I don't know whether you sort of watch these programs or care to admit it. We're not contestants on Bachelorette or Farmer Once a Wife where, you know, being chosen doesn't mean you'll succeed in the end, right?

[10 : 58] Which is just so insecure and nerve-racking. I don't know why people get on these shows, but anyway, they invest all this emotion and energy to be attractive or whatever and then they're still at the mercy, aren't they, of the farmer or the bachelorette or whatever.

Well, God is not like that. When He chooses us, we're secure. Our end is secure. Holy and blameless in His sight.

Done. Chosen by God. But for this plan to succeed, I mean, certain things need to happen first because holiness and blamelessness are qualities that require us to make choices willingly.

Robots can't be holy or blameless. Only people can because they have to choose between good and evil. And sadly, given that choice, humans have let God down, haven't we?

We've chosen evil more than good. And so, even though God has predestined all of this to occur, we have willingly gone down the wrong path.

[12 : 09] And so, God's plan had to provide for a way for sinful people to be restored to Him. And that's where the next part of God's plan comes in, which is that He sends God's Son, His Son, Jesus, to earth so that through Him we might have adoption to sonship.

You see, we lost the right to sonship because of sin. We're outside God's family. We don't deserve to be heirs of His kingdom or to have the blessings that we're now speaking of.

But God graciously allows us back in or invites and even calls us back in through God's only rightful heir, Jesus. And when we do, we share fully in His inheritance.

We're no longer just servants, but we're actually sons, heirs in God's house, co-heirs, even Paul writes in Romans, with Christ.

But for that to occur, we have to firstly be redeemed and forgiven, verse 7. Redemption is the idea of buying back something or setting someone free from bondage.

[13 : 18] And for us, we are slaves to sin. But we also need forgiveness forgiveness because we're not just mastered by our sin, we're also responsible for the sin that we commit.

Now, if you want to try and think through how that can be, well, just think about your own life. One example when you've done wrong. Maybe when you lose your temper. Now, there is a sense in which when you've lost your temper, you've lost control, right?

Your emotions have gotten the better of you. They've mastered you in that sense. And hence, your actions and your words then follow. And yet, we all know that we, people, have to be responsible for our anger, don't we?

Because if you don't, if you don't think that's the case, then we really shouldn't be convicting people for road rage, do we? Or other acts of violence. But no, we consider that they are still responsible, even though they've lost their temper, for those actions.

So, redemption sets us free from our master, sin, but forgiveness is what puts us right before God because we are responsible. We are actually perpetrators of our own crimes.

[14 : 38] And Jesus provides for all this by giving his life on the cross. His blood, it says, the above, redeems us and enables our forgiveness. And then Paul tells us that God does all this because he is motivated by love and grace.

That's who he is. Verse 4, he predestined us in love. Verse 6, to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the one he loves.

And again in verse 7, this is done in accordance with the riches of God's grace, which he lavished on us. Now when I think of the word lavish, the thing that comes to my mind is generous gravy that goes with an amazing steak.

You know, sometimes you go to these fancy restaurants and they serve you just a little bit of sauce with their amazing steak. And you have two slices into the steak. The first two were really good because of the sauce.

And then it's all gone. And then you go, wow, okay, still a great steak, but it's not that enjoyable anymore, is it? But when you have gravy that's generous, you know, served in a big pouring jug, and you just lavish it on your steak with it, wow, yum.

[16 : 00] Sorry to you vegetarians there, but that's what God's love and grace is like, isn't it? Poured out without being stingy.

Poured out because there's more there. You know, enough to go all around and more. That's what lavish is all about. God's grace has been lavished on us.

And finally, verse 9, Paul tells us too that we're also blessed because God makes his wonderful plan known to us. With all wisdom and understanding we read, he made known to us the mystery of his will.

Now, some of us might think, is that really a blessing? I mean, so what if we know the intricacies of God's plan? Well, remember that I think what Paul's talking about here is not just revealing to us what God has already done, because we can see that, but also why, and also where it's all headed in history.

Now, we hate being left in the dark, don't we? When you are young, maybe, or still young, and your parents make big decisions for the family and they don't tell you, you know, they move cities and then tell you you need to leave school, not like that, do you?

[17 : 17] Or when you're on a road trip and you keep asking, where are we going, when will we get there, and they never tell you? That's not nice, is it? Well, God has graciously told us, hasn't he, where all of history is headed, where we are going.

He's revealed his plan from the start to the finish. Now, not the detail, but the big picture. And yes, he's done that over time, progressively in the Old Testament, but now in Christ, everything we need to know for our lives is known, our purpose in life, our hope for eternity.

We're not left in the dark as to where we're headed or what to do with it, with our lives. We know all that, and to me that's a huge blessing, isn't it? Because in the face of life's uncertainties, the chaos and disasters that we see around the world, we know.

We know where history is headed. We know God's master plan. Yes, we still need to trust God for the details. That is, we don't know what life may hold next week or even next month or the year after, but we actually know the very end.

We may not know the individual path to that end, but we know that end. And that's revealed to us in verse 10, which I'll come back to in a while because I want to finish with it.

[18 : 44] It's actually printed right in bold print at the bottom of the outline. But I want to finish the passage first because I think in verse 11, Paul seems to sort of bring up something new and head in a slightly different direction.

And you can tell that by, well, you can't really, you can tell that it's a new paragraph in your Bible. So reading, in him we also were 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 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.

Now, I say there's a bit of change because I wonder where you notice that we've gone from the we language to the you language in verse 13. And so there's been a lot of discussion over who Paul is referring to with the we and who's the you.

And that also raises a further question as to whether we have the same we throughout the whole passage. That is, is the we that we now have in verse 10 or 11, the same as the we that we had started with in verse 3.

[20 : 07] Now, I think it's probably fair to conclude that the closer we get to verse 13, the more the reference to the we is to be contrasted with the you. Right? It's sort of in the same frame of thought.

And views on this do differ, but I think that because the ideas of being chosen and predestined and inheritance are raised again, because he says we are also raising it as a new topic, I think the verse, what is happening in verse 11 is something more specific than what is in verse 4.

So back there in verse 4, the choosing is in relation to salvation generally. but here when we get to verse 11, God is choosing the Jews, verse 12 first, and that includes Paul to put their hope in Christ, and so the you then is in verse 13 is a reference to the Gentiles which the Ephesians Paul was writing to were predominantly anyway.

They then are included in Christ when they hear for the first time the message of truth, the gospel from people like Paul, the Jews, and others in order to be saved.

And Paul says there that they are assured of this because of the seal of the Holy Spirit. And actually if you go back to Acts chapter 19, there was a visible demonstration of it because when Paul first arrived in Ephesus and ministered to those who only received John's baptism to that point, the Holy Spirit came on them and they were baptized in the Spirit.

[21 : 52] in that incident. So I think there's maybe an allusion back to that incident. But this Jews first and then Gentiles afterwards, which he picks up on again in chapter 2, is a key part of God's master plan.

Not a detail, but part of his plan because it fulfills what God promised Abraham, the father of Jesus, all the way back in that first reading that Jillian brought to us in Genesis chapter 12.

For he says that I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, curse those who curse you, and all peoples will be blessed, all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

Thus, God's plan was to bless all peoples on earth but through Abraham and Israel and in particular Abraham's offspring who we know to be God's son, Jesus.

So, all of us, Jew or Gentile, enjoy God's spiritual blessings equally, verse 3, in the same way in Christ, but there's a priority in the way it happens.

[23 : 05] The Jews are chosen first to be the bearers of this message, to be given the hope first so that they can then share this message to the rest of us Gentiles in the world.

But the ultimate goal in God's master plan is, going back to verse 10, is to then unite under Christ all things in creation both in heaven and on earth.

Friends, Paul may be highlighting blessings, to each of us, for us as Christians to enjoy individually, but the truth is, we're not the main focus of God's master plan.

Christ is. The repeated mention of in Christ should give us a clue, but it says there explicitly now in verse 10. God's plan is to exalt his son both in heaven and on earth and to unite all things under him and this was always and has been God's plan from the start.

We are blessed, we are created, were created for Christ. The blessings we have are not for us to enjoy selfishly by our own selves, but actually so that we might bring glory to God and his son.

[24 : 25] Now, many of you might be quite musical when you go on to concerts and things like that, but you know the first violin in an orchestra, probably the most accomplished violinist in the orchestra, right?

You know, they would probably be playing the violin very beautifully. Their sound would be sublime, wouldn't it? But, the first violin is not the focus, if you are playing a piano concerto, for example, the first violin is not the focus of the concerto.

It's he or she, no, right? He or she is meant to lead the strings, and then, with the rest of the orchestra, support the piano, which is the focus of the concerto, right?

And that's the same with us. We may be blessed to be part of God's master plan, but we were not created to bring glory to ourselves, but to God, through his son Jesus.

Now, of course, the son in turns, all that he does and achieves, gives meaning and purpose and joy and love to all of us who submit to that plan.

[25 : 41] So, are you searching for ultimate purpose in life? Do you want to know where you fit into the world, what you're doing on earth? Well, when you put your faith in Jesus, when you put your hope in Christ, you are living under God's master plan for Christ.

Your life is to be fully aligned with God's master plan. So, yes, put your hope wholly in Christ so that you might be forgiven for your sins and have redemption.

Rejoice in your sonship through Christ. Know that God is making you holy, has already made you holy and blameless through Christ, but sanctifying as well. But ultimately, all of this is so that then you might unite with all the others in Christ's body under Christ in this world.

It may be humbling to think that you're actually not the center of God's attention, that God's plan for you isn't actually about you, but Christ, but that is a really, really good thing.

Because when you live for Jesus, you're actually the most blessed person in the world. That's not how the world thinks or tells you. I know because when you grow up in schools or whatever, even in the world, they're always talking about you, making the center of attention you, which actually ultimately makes you miserable and anxious.

[27 : 09] In contrast, when you lay aside your selfish desires and live for God and his plan, according to his plan, live for God and his son according to his plan, we will find freedom, we will find blessing and joy.

So this week, the simple message from Paul is really that we need to put and keep putting our hope in Christ, believe in Jesus, because that's the one and only thing that unlocks all of God's spiritual blessing for us.

Every good thing God has for us is to be found by being in Christ, but then living for him to see God's plan fulfilled.

And when you believe that and that sinks into you deeply and you're convicted and you embrace that for your life, then what happens too is what has happened to Paul.

We overflow in praise to God. Because as we stand back and see what Paul has wrote, don't we think, what a wonderful God we have.

[28 : 18] What a glorious plan. What love, what grace lavished on us. How marvelous his wisdom and understanding. And you know, that's my hope and prayer that as we continue in Ephesians and we keep looking at more and more what Paul is going to review and God is going to review, that actually even though we want to apply the letter, we also want to grow in our worship and amazement for God.

Praise for him. And you can see how Paul is impacted by this because he begins his letter with praise, not with instructions, not even with theological, there's lots of theology there, but he begins in the form of praise.

Praise or blessed in verse 3 and then three times afterwards, verse 6, verse 12, verse 14, praise to God's glory, praise to his glorious grace, praise to his glory.

Our lives lived to serve God ought to be preceded by and proceed from praise and worship to God. It should flow out of us knowing and appreciating just what God has done for us.

Before we think about what we ought to do for God, we need to know that he has already loved us, he has chosen us, he has made us holy and blameless, according to his pleasure and will, and he's bringing us under his son, Jesus, in order to bring unity to all things under him.

[29 : 51] Let's praise God for that, let's be amazed by that, and then let's live to that praise.

Let's pray. voy voy voy! Thank you.