

Counting Blessings

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 31st of December 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Counting Blessings and is from Ephesians chapter 1 verses 1 to 14. Another year over and another one about to begin.

How do you assess the year past? No doubt disappointments. No doubt wasted opportunities. No doubt failures here and there.

No doubt unfulfilled resolutions. But no doubt also you could think of some blessings in the year past as well.

So, I wonder if I were to ask you what are the blessings of the past year, what you would say. My hunch is that if I asked each person at Holy Trinity what the blessings of the past year were, and I sort of tottered them up in sort of categories, I think the first one, the top category, would be health.

[1 : 22] I suspect the second one might be family. The third one perhaps home, or a job, or income.

The next one might be to do with enjoyment of something in particular during the year past. Others might have life in general, the beauty of creation, the goodness of life.

Sometimes you get a sense of those blessings from how people give thanks to God in their prayers. Looking back to Thanksgiving Sunday two months ago, or other ways in which people thank God and the things that they thank him for.

Another way that I see the things that people list in a sense as their blessings are in those Christmas letters. I'm guilty of this, I suppose, but those mass-produced letters telling you what they have done, their wife has done, their children have done, and how they've learnt to crawl, or make messes, or go to school, or what music lessons and sports lessons they're doing, and so on.

Well, it's hard to keep up, it seems to me, with everyone's children and grandchildren. None of those things appear on the list of blessings at the beginning of the letter to the Ephesians.

[2 : 43] I'm not sure why it is that our lists are so different from this. I suspect it's because we're so caught up in our world, our sights are so low, perhaps, that we look at the daily, physical, worldly things, we give thanks to God for them, but we miss the big picture, the real and lasting blessings that are already ours in Christ.

St. Paul almost, I think, goes over the top in the first part of chapter 1, as we've heard it read. He begins, I think, by just wanting to give God thanks, but he ends up in one of the longest sentences in the New Testament, verses 3 to 14, in all one sentence in Greek, although, to help us digest an incomprehensible, or no, an indigestible sentence, the English translation has broken it into several sentences.

But I think as he gives thanks to God, he just seems to pile on blessing after blessing as his mind just runs riot with all the great and good things that God has blessed him with, and indeed blessed us with as well.

Paul's writing to a church in a place called Ephesus, which is on the Aegean Sea, or the Aegean coast of Turkey, although these days it's a few miles inland because the river that runs past Ephesus has silted up, and so it's not quite a seaport as it was in Paul's day.

But it was a significant place then, if now it's one of the main tourist attractions in Turkey for its fabulous ruins. If you ever come into the kitchen in the vicarage, you'll see a big picture or poster of the ruins in Ephesus.

[4 : 28] It was one of the sites, or it's the site of the Temple of Diana, one of the seven great wonders of the world. And if you read earlier in the New Testament in the Acts of the Apostles, St. Paul comes to Ephesus, he begins preaching the gospel there, he founds the church there.

But after some time there, many months indeed, the silversmiths are going out of business because so many pagans are converting to Christianity that they're not making the idols and statues that they were.

So there's a great big riot in the theatre that you can still go into at Ephesus, and Paul is eventually taken out of Ephesus with his life threatened because of the riots. Incidentally, the theatre that you can go into now has become unstable in recent years because of an Elton John concert there about ten years ago.

The sound was so loud that it's destabilised some of the thousand or two thousand year old theatre, which is, well, fairly appalling. Wouldn't happen with Mozart.

Sometime later, some years later, Paul is in prison and he's writing back to the church in Ephesus that he'd founded. We're not exactly sure whether he's in Rome or Caesarea.

[5 : 37] We're not quite sure who's looking after the church at this stage, although at a later stage again probably Timothy was. He begins his letter with a standard greeting. In the ancient texts, you would write who you were.

In our letters, of course, you put your name at the end. In those days, you put it at the beginning, which is far more logical because you don't want to read a whole letter to discover then who's written it to you. But so he says who he is.

Paul, he's an apostle. That means that he's a witness of the resurrection and that he's sent to proclaim the gospel in particular to Gentiles, non-Jews, although he never leaves them out either. And he writes his letter to the saints who are in Ephesus.

Now you imagine that somebody arrives with this letter from Paul, Tychicus perhaps, and he summons the church together on a Sunday and he says, now I've got a letter here for the saints here.

Well, who's going to put up their hand to say, well, I'm a saint in Ephesus? Imagine that we got a letter and it says, to the saints of Holy Trinity Doncaster. Who's going to put up their hand to say, I'm a saint?

[6 : 39] Most of us will keep our hands firmly clasped to our sides. But that's because we've got a wrong understanding what a saint is. All Christians are saints. It doesn't mean a perfect person.

It doesn't mean an especially good or moral person like Mother Teresa. But all Christians are saints because they're all set apart to belong to God. That's literally what the idea means.

So this is a letter addressed to every Christian in Ephesus. He extends to them greetings, not the normal Greek greetings, but Christian greetings, grace and peace, summaries in a sense of the Christian faith and gospel.

And they are greetings of grace and peace that come from God the Father and also from the Lord Jesus Christ. Putting God the Father and Jesus equal, on a par with each other.

They are both the source of grace and peace. There's no place for Jesus on the second rung of the ladder here. Clearly by indication, Paul regards Jesus as fully divine alongside God the Father.

[7 : 42] Then comes the beginning of the substance of his letter. And like most, but not all of Paul's letters, he begins with a statement of praise and thanks.

And as I say, verse 3 really doesn't end as a sentence until you get to the end of verse 14. I want to pick out just some of the things in this.

The first thing to note is that God the Father is the subject of the action. That is, almost all the verbs, if not all, have God as their subject.

See how that happens. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's the opening statement, if you like. And then what does it say about God the Father?

He has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing. That is, God the Father is the subject of the action of blessing. Then in the next verse, God the Father chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

[8 : 48] Verse 5, God the Father destined us for adoption as his children. Verse 6, to the praise of God the Father's glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the beloved.

God the Father is the one who has bestowed grace on Christian people in Christ. Then in verse 7, it talks about being in Christ. We have redemption, which we'll come back to later.

But then verse 8, God the Father lavished the riches of his grace on us. Verse 9, God the Father has made known to us the mystery of his will.

And so on it goes. God the Father is the subject of all the action. That's why he's being blessed and praised. There's no giving thanks to God for the things that I have done, or the Ephesian church has done, or that Paul has done.

There's no, Blessed be God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, because in the past year I've been able to do this, or I've had this success, or this reward, or something like that. Blessed be God the Father, because God the Father has blessed us, has chosen us, has destined us, has bestowed grace upon us, has lavished grace upon us, has made known his will to us.

[10:02] God's done all of that. And nowhere is Paul, or any Christian, the subject of the action in the statement of praise to God. The initiative and the priority lies entirely with God the Father.

Now if that's not clear from the way I've described it, look at verse 4 in particular. It's especially clear there. God the Father chose us, Christians, in Christ, before the foundation of the world.

Now that's quite a long time ago. That's not even last millennium. It's not even the millennium before. Before the foundation of the world is even before your grandparents were born.

It's even before Australia had a white settlement, and it's even before Australia had an aboriginal settlement. In fact, it goes back a long time before that.

It goes back further than you can imagine. Before God even spoke the words of the first page of the Bible, let there be light, God had chosen us in Christ, before the foundation of the world.

[11:14] Now it's hard to get our minds around such a statement, I think. But it is quite profound. It takes away from us any initiative, any claim on God, any priority, any sense in which ultimately we chose God.

No, He chose us. And He chose us before we were a twinkling in our fathers, fathers, fathers, fathers, fathers, Adam and Eve's eye. God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

That's how significant and profound the initiative of God is. That's how purposeful He is as well. You see, some people think that God made the world and it was pretty good to start off with and then Adam and Eve mucked it up and God had to scratch around for a while in His study and think, well, here's plan B, I'll send a flood.

Oh, that didn't work. They're still quite bad people. Plan C, I'll make promises to Abraham. That doesn't seem to do good. So plan D, I'll send Jesus. Ah, that's the solution. It's not like that at all. Even before God said, let there be light, He knew what was going to happen and He planned for what would happen. He chose us in Christ.

[12:28] He knew that human beings would fall. He knew that Jesus would be the solution and He chose us, Christian people, in Christ before He'd ever done any creating at all.

Sometimes you hear of two people who are married or going out together and how they came to be married or going out together.

Occasionally you hear of love at first sight where the two of them sort of see each other across the room and eyes fixed like on the movies and they live happily ever after sort of thing.

But sometimes you hear of it where one person notices the other. The other's completely oblivious to this. And the person who does the noticing begins to do the chasing.

And in the end, the other person notices the person who's already noticed them. Now in a sense, that's like God and us. He had His attention on us well before we were even there, but if I can sort of change the metaphor a bit, well before we even noticed Him.

[13:31] He had His attention fixed on us. He'd chosen us and then He set about to get us. Now, the metaphor doesn't quite fit, but you get the picture.

It is God's initiative. It's not ours. It is God who's done the choosing of us, not us of Him. The theological term for this is predestination.

Something that theologians are bamboozled by, that many Christians find rather confounding. Let me say that even if our minds cannot grasp it, the point of it is that we can be wonderfully reassured.

God's chosen us. That's much more reassuring than me choosing God. His hand's on me from before the foundation of the world. And if His hand has been on me for all those thousands of years up until the 31st of December, the year 2000, I can be confident that His hand will stay on me.

He's chosen me. He's not fickle or faithless. He's not going to change His mind. So I can be wonderfully reassured that despite my weakness and failing, on the 31st of December 2001, His hand will still be on me.

[14:50] I'm still chosen by Him. And on the 31st of December 3001, heaven forbid that I'm still here, His hand will still be on me. I'm still chosen by Him.

And for centuries and millennia and for eternity to come, the same will be true. My destiny is assured because God has chosen me before the foundation of the world.

That is wonderfully reassuring for us as Christians. It ought to be for you. Even if our small minds can't quite grasp the profundity of predestination, it's wonderfully, pastorally reassuring to know that God has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

So God is the subject of all this action. The second point builds on the first. Everything God has done and does, He has done and does in, through, by, or because of Jesus Christ.

That is, God doesn't act, God the Father doesn't act in a sense, independently of Jesus, as though Jesus is a bystander or a spectator for what God the Father is doing in the world.

[16:09] Everything God has done, everything that God does, and everything that God will do, is done in, and because of, and through, and by Jesus Christ.

There are ways in which we see this here. In these 14 verses, the name Jesus Christ, or Him, referring to Jesus Christ, occurs 15 times in just 14 verses.

That's a lot. So, what has God done? In verse 3, we saw that He's blessed us, but notice what it says, He has blessed us in Christ.

Verse 4, God chose us. How did He choose us? In Christ. Verse 5, God destined us for adoption as His children.

How? Through Jesus Christ. Verse 6, God has freely bestowed on us grace.

[17:14] How? In the Beloved. That is, in Jesus Christ. Verse 10, All of what God has done in redemption and so on is a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in Christ.

Things in heaven and things on earth. Verse 11, We have also obtained an inheritance. How? In Christ.

In verse 12, Christians are people who hope. How? In Christ. Verse 13, Christians are those who believe, have heard and believed the word of truth, the gospel of salvation, and have believed, how?

In Christ, in Him. And then finally, again in verse 13, we have been marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit and that also is in Christ.

Everything God has done for us, everything God does for us, everything God will do for us is done in Christ.

[18:30] You cannot put Jesus more central to the purposes and plans of God from before the foundation of the world to the end of time. Before the foundation of the world we were chosen in Christ.

Then in history God has worked out some of that choosing by bringing us into being His children and blessing us etc. in Christ and then in the future God's purpose is to bring all things not just people not just Christians but the whole universe under Christ the head.

Jesus is the centre piece of everything that God has done from beginning of time to the end of time including where we are in the middle of time now. Let me concentrate on just three things that God has done in Christ for us that are mentioned here.

In verse 7 in Christ we have redemption through His blood the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of His grace that He lavished on us.

the metaphor of being redeemed comes from the ancient world from the slave world or warfare where somebody is captured or is a slave and they need to or money needs to be paid or something needs to be paid in order to liberate or redeem them from slavery from being a prisoner of war or today the same sort of thing might apply where you take your watch along to a pawnbroker because you need some money in order to redeem your watch you have to pay usually more money than what you got for it in the first place.

[20:05] That's the idea behind this. A payment is required in order for redemption to occur for liberation to occur. Now talking about us being redeemed through Jesus' blood firstly it implies that we are needing redemption that we are enslaved to something and the Bible's view is that we are enslaved to our sin but it means that in order for us to be set free from our sin to be forgiven for our sins some payment needs to be made.

Well my pockets are empty and even if they were full I wouldn't have enough to pay for the forgiveness of my sins to God. The payment you see is through his blood through Jesus' blood is

what verse 7 says.

In other parts of the New Testament it's the precious blood of Jesus or that's the cost or the payment that's paid for redemption. That is what is paid to set us free is Jesus' death on the cross. Who pays it? God. We don't pay it though we should but we can't we can't afford it. God pays it for us. So we are redeemed from our sins we're set free from our sins we're forgiven for our sins and it's what God does.

It's God's initiative through and through and that was his plan before the foundation of the world. When he chose us before the foundation of the world he chose us knowing that he would pay the price through Jesus' death and blood to set us free from our sins so that we could be his children and with him for eternity.

[21 : 38] Extraordinary plan really but that's God's plan and the result is that we're forgiven. Second thing to comment on and in a sense the fruit of that first thing though it occurs earlier in verse 5 rather than later than verse 7 is that God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ according to the good pleasure of his will.

What that tells us is that being a child of God is not natural. We're not children of God because we're human beings. Too often you hear that said by Christians and non-Christians alike that somehow we're all God's children in this world because he made us.

Not true. The title to be a child of God is reserved exclusively for saved or forgiven people. It's never used for people in the world generally for human beings generally.

To be a child of God is a special privilege. It's not our right because we're human it's our privilege because we're redeemed. So when Jesus' blood redeems us and sets us free from our sins we are then adopted into God's family.

So we don't belong there by rights by nature but we're adopted in. God becomes then our father. It's because we're saved and forgiven that we can call God father not because we're human beings.

[23 : 09] And Jesus in a sense becomes in one sense our brother. The third thing to comment on about what God has done for us comes at the end of this passage verses 13 and 14.

In Christ you also when you had heard the word of truth the gospel of your salvation and had believed in him were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.

This is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people to the praise of his glory. In the ancient world a seal was the personal sign of an owner of something.

It's a bit like I suppose if you've got a book you write your name in it. I write my name in every single book I've got I hope because I know that when I borrow them I may forget who's borrowed them but at least they've got my name in it so they remember who they've borrowed it from and I've got a better chance of getting it back.

It's a mark of ownership even if I don't go to the extreme of having those little book plates in every book that I've got that would take me forever to put in but it's a seal I belong to an owner so the Holy Spirit given to every Christian is firstly a mark of ownership a seal to show that I am God's but we're also told in verse 14 it is a pledge of our inheritance that is it's almost like a down payment or a deposit of our future a guarantee if you like of what the future will be like now heaven remains yet in the future but the spirit given to us now as Christian people is like a guarantee or a foretaste of the fullness of blessings that await us in heaven hard sometimes to see that I guess but what it is saying is that there is a case for blessings now indeed going back to verse 3 we're already blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places but there's the sense in which the fullness of those blessings awaits us yet in heaven in the future now that creates a bit of a tension there's to some extent blessings now there's to another extent blessings that yet await us that are not yet now the Holy Spirit is the link between the two in a sense the guarantee of future blessings and the foretaste of those now now Christians often make one of two mistakes sometimes they understate or under expect

[25 : 50] God's blessings and God's Holy Spirit now that is they think all of this awaits us in the future I don't expect spiritual blessings and I don't expect the power of God's Spirit at work in my life now that all comes in the future it's an understatement now and sometimes we might be guilty of that but the other side of the mistake is that sometimes Christians over expect too much now as though now we should expect almost the fullness of God's blessings and God's heavenly blessings now one of the ways in which that over expectation is seen is perhaps in some Pentecostal type churches where they expect full healing now and full prosperity now and great wealth and huge numbers converted and so on that I think sometimes is an over expectation we live in a tension

between the already and the not yet we must on the one hand not under expect God to work but on the other hand not over expect him either we have already every spiritual blessing verse 3 and yet we await the fullness of those blessings which I think is what verse 14 is saying to us well let me conclude with a comment about the purpose of what God is on about here

I've talked about what God has done and what God has been doing but why is God doing it well Paul gives us a glimpse of that here if we have a doctrine of predestination then it implies that there is a destination a purpose and certainly that is the case here God has predestined us chosen us before the foundation of the world because he's got a particular destination in mind that's where we're heading and we do well to heed it because it gives us direction for our life I remember once racing down the ramp at Flinders Street station onto platform four to catch the Glen Waverly line train which I did periodically and you hear the person shouting out what train it is think that must be me on I get sit down we head out of Flinders Street the wrong way this is before the tunnel or the loop or whatever I end up at Spencer Street and realise that

I'm not on a Glen Waverly line train I'm on a Gowery line train and I'm heading completely the wrong direction well that's not a thing that we should do as Christian people we should take heed of passages like this that tell us the direction and the destination for which we're headed what is it Paul sums it up I think in verses 9 and 10 God has made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him in Christ that is things things in heaven and things on earth see God's purposes are not a mystery for us he's told us what he's on about he's told us that his destination for us and for this universe is that all things come under Christ the head doesn't mean that we know everything about God's purpose but it does know where we're headed so what does it mean

God is going to bring the whole universe under Jesus Christ the head it is saying that Jesus is the Lord of all it is saying that Jesus like God the Father is sovereign and will exercise that sovereignty in a way that everyone and everything will recognise one day that's what God's on about it's not always easy to see that when you pick up the age each day when you read the accounts of the Middle East or Africa or disasters or road deaths where you read about politics and corruption and cricket wins and losses where's God's purpose in all of this it somehow seems to get lost too often but that's what God is on about he's on about bringing the universe under Christ and one day it will be but Paul clarifies a little bit of what that means in this passage going back to verse 4 God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world here's a statement of purpose to be holy and blameless before him in love so for us to be under

Christ the head means that we will be holy and blameless in love that means that if our destination is holiness blamelessness and love then if we're heading towards that destination they will be things that we practice and manifest in our lives today we will seek to become holy people blameless people which doesn't mean perfect but it certainly means forgiven it'll mean loving people as well but one other point of clarification three times in this long sentence there is a refrain not quite the exact words each time but in verse 6 we read God is doing all this to the praise of his glorious grace and then in verse 12 God is doing all this for the praise of his glory and the end of the sentence verse 14 God is doing all this to the praise of his glory three times in effect we get the statement [31 : 27] God's purpose is for the praise of his glory that might sound a bit selfish that God is doing all sorts of extraordinary things in the world through Jesus Christ for the praise of his own glory as though he's doing it for his own ego so the people will praise him and glorify him now if a human being were doing all this then we could rightly say they are being egocentric full of themselves but it's hard to pin that on God who is perfect who takes total initiative in everything here he deserves the praise and he deserves the glory and so it's a right end for us it's a right end for the world to praise God's glory sometimes as Christians we become too self-centered and even in a list like this let alone the lists of blessings that I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon we can become so self-centered that we think of what God has done for me

God has done this for me look at what God has done for me this past year but this final statement of purpose breaks us out of that selfishness because we realize in the end that what God has done for us is ultimately for his glory if that is our destination that we come under Christ the head as holy blameless and loving people for the praise of his glory that should determine something of how we live our life day by day today tomorrow this year next year the year after the millennium after we are to live for the praise of God's glory he is worth it and he deserves it it is the least that we can give him let's pray oh God our minds are overawed by the grandeur of your purpose for this universe our

minds are overawed by the supreme place of
Jesus Christ in that plan we come humbly before you knowing that what you have done for us is far
greater than even we can imagine and your purpose is far better than we can even hope for from
the beginning of time to the end you are sovereign help us we pray to live our lives under Christ our
head help us to be holy and blameless and loving and help us to live each day to the praise of your
glory for that is why you've made us that is why you've saved us that is why you've adopted us as
your children that is why you've bestowed and lavished grace upon us that is why you've blessed us
with every spiritual blessing that's why you've given us your spirit as a guarantee that we may live to
the praise of your glory help us oh God to do that
Amen