

Thanks be to God

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[0 : 00] Our daughter got her very first iPhone. It was a very exciting moment for her. One of her friends, Natasha, is here tonight. I got the Dodo deal too, by the way.

Now, it wasn't new. It was just an old one of ours that I had repaired because I'm cheap. But it was because that I actually forgot to pick her up after a dance class last weekend.

And so she was left there waiting for me for over an hour with no phone to ring me. And I'd like to think that I'd never forget to pick up her again. But Michelle said it's probably safe we just get her phone.

So that's what we did. And the point of the story is not so much the phone, but her reaction. So with her permission, I videoed it. And this is her reaction on the next slide. Thanks, Jessie. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Get your best. Get your best. As you can see, she's very excited and thankful for what she got.

[0 : 59] And I don't know if you noticed it at the end, but her joy and thanks meant she praised me. She said at the end, you're the best. I said, keep going. She said, no.

And walked away. But the point is, joy and thankfulness often leads to praise. And today is Thanksgiving Sunday, as Mark said. And although our passage tonight doesn't use the word Thanksgiving, it's there in the background.

You see, Paul is so joyful and thankful for what God has given him that he breaks into praise for God. Look at verse 3. After the introduction, he says, praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And he continues, in fact, without pausing full breath, such as his joy and thankfulness. It's hard to see it in our English translations because there's lots of full stops there.

But in the original Greek language that Paul wrote in, verse 3 all the way down to verse 14 is one long sentence. 202 words without a full stop.

[2 : 03] It's like Paul is so excited and thankful he cannot pause for breath as he praises God. And what's more, Paul actually wrote this while he was in prison, we think. And yet, despite his physical lack of blessing, his lack of physical blessings, what God has given him is such that he can still praise God with joy and thankfulness.

And so what has God given him? Well, it's clearly not an iPhone. They weren't invented yet. But it's in the rest of verse 3. Have a look there. He says, Praise be to the God and Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

God has given Paul and every Christian every spiritual blessing in Christ. Now, there are a few things to notice about verse 3. Spiritual blessings are likely to be spiritual because they belong to the spiritual realm and they're given by the Holy Spirit.

Second, these blessings are found in Christ. You see the end of verse 3 there? Second, that is, we must trust in Christ if we want to receive these blessings. They're only available in him.

Third, they are also in the heavenly realms as opposed to the earthly realms of this world. That is, they are part of God's eternal kingdom, which has begun now when Jesus came, but it will continue on forever as opposed to this world, which will be judged and then renewed.

[3 : 25] Now, most people in life chase after the blessings of this world, though, don't they? You know, health, wealth and happiness. But they do not last because they belong to the earthly realm, to this world.

And so we cannot take them with us when we die. What's more, they're not even guaranteed when we live. Our money often goes more quickly than it comes.

Is that your experience? It's my experience, especially with kids. Or our health can go up and down and usually more down as we get older. Our possessions often break.

Our jobs are not always secure. However, you see, earthly blessings are limited in both length and certainty or their lack of. But not so with spiritual blessings, for these are the ones which are in the heavenly realms, that belong to the eternal kingdom.

And that means that they will last forever. And so, you know, in a worldly sense, they're a great return on your investment, if you like. These are the blessings that are really worth having, in other words.

[4 : 33] Our fourth thing to notice in verse 3 is that God has already given them to us. The word blessed is in the past tense, isn't it? And so, although these blessings are part of God's kingdom and the world to come, because that kingdom has begun with Jesus, then we can begin to enjoy them now.

And fifth, we have all of them. Notice that verse 3 doesn't say he has blessed us with some spiritual blessings in Christ. It says every spiritual blessing in Christ.

And as I've said before, if we have every spiritual blessing now, then how many do we lack? None. Instead, we've got them all.

Does anyone remember the name of the rock band that sung, We Will, We Will Rock You? Queen. Yeah, I asked the early morning service. They're going, what? Yep, should have thought of that. Queen's got, on the next slide, they've got another hit which says, I want it all, I want it all, I want it now, which is pretty much the anthem of our youth today. But when it comes to these spiritual blessings, we can rewrite the lyric to say, We've got them all, we've got them all, we've got them now.

[5 : 46] No wonder Paul praises God, you see. And as he does so, he starts to list some of these blessings, which are on your outline. The first one is election in verse 4. So verse 4, he says, God chose or elected us, you see.

Before the creation of the world, God chose you to inherit his kingdom. Even though he knew we would sin. Even though he knew that we would not deserve it.

Even though he knew it would cost him his only son. He still chose us to believe in Jesus and to count us as holy and blameless in his sight. Even though we are not holy and blameless in our lives.

In other words, before the creation of the world and out of all people of the world, God had you in mind. He chose you. Now that's pretty amazing when you think about it.

And it makes us incredibly special, doesn't it? And no wonder Paul praises God. What's more, God chose us not just to be a friend, but to be part of the family.

[7 : 00] Which brings us to the second blessing of adoption. Do you see verse 5 and 6? He says, In love, God predestined us for adoption to sonship. Through Jesus Christ, and in accordance with or because of his pleasure and will.

To the praise of his glorious grace. Which he has freely given us in Christ, whom he loves. You see, out of love for us, God chose to adopt us as his sons.

Such that we can now call the God of the universe, Father. Again, it's an extraordinary privilege when you think about it. We're just so used to it.

We take it for granted. I mean, think about powerful world leaders. Kings and queens. Presidents and prime ministers. You can't just walk in and see them, can you? There's a protocol.

There's security checks. And the like. And yet, when it comes to the most powerful leader of the universe, God. We can approach him whenever and wherever we like.

[8 : 05] And call him Father. Because we're now adopted as his sons. It's extraordinary when you think about it. And sons is important.

Because in the ancient world, it was the sons who received the inheritance. And so it's not a comment about gender here. It's a comment about our privilege. Our inheritance.

In fact, there's even a footnote in your Bible next to the word sonship. Which tells you that. You see, our adoption as God's sons means we will share in the inheritance that belongs to the son.

Christ. A friend of mine called Simon grew up with two adopted children in his family. His parents had children of their own. Simon being one of them. But they were acutely aware of the thousands of children who had nothing.

And so out of love for those who had nothing, Simon's parents adopted two children from an Indian orphanage. And Simon said that when they joined the family, they were treated like equals.

[9 : 05] They were loved equally. Treated equally. Cared for equally. In fact, when Simon's father passed away and some of the inheritance was given out to the children, it was shared equally between the natural children and the adopted children.

And that's what this blessing of adoption means for us. As adopted sons, we now have an equal share in the inheritance with God's true son, Christ. Does that not tell you how loved and special we are?

Especially when you remember that it cost God a great deal to adopt us. It cost Simon's parents roughly about \$60,000. They had to make several flights to India. There was the fees, the paperwork and the like.

But our adoption costs God much, much more, didn't it? It cost God the blood of his only son, Jesus. Not to buy us from India, of course, but to redeem us from sin.

Which brings us to the next blessing of redemption. Look at verse 7 to 8. He says, In Christ, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with or because of the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us.

[10 : 25] See, in order to adopt us, God had to pay the price to redeem us and forgive us. And that price, as it says in verse 7, was the blood of his only son, Christ.

Christ. And we've got to remember that God did this while we were his enemies. And again, we're so familiar with this, its effect is lost on us sometimes, I think.

But imagine giving yourself or one of your loved ones to die for someone who hates you, who ignores you.

Then you get a little bit more of an idea of what it was like. You see, it was while we were enemies that Christ died for us. And that's amazing grace or generosity, isn't it?

I see how Paul describes God's grace in verse 7 and 8. He said it was in accordance to or because of the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.

[11 : 23] You see how Paul's trying to communicate the greatness of God's generosity here? The abundance of it? I was doing a children's talk here at church a while ago.

And I was trying to explain to the kids this concept of God's grace or undeserved generosity. And so what I did was I got Big Ted from my daughter.

So here's the chair. Big Ted. And I placed him on the chair and all the kids came down the front. I introduced Big Ted to them. And I said, Big Ted loves lollies. And then I said, oh, who else loves lollies?

And all the kids put their hands up here. And then I said, imagine Big Ted's being naughty. Does Big Ted deserve any lollies? And all the kids went, no. And I said, but imagine his mother still got a bag of lollies and gave it to Big Ted.

How would you respond then? And one kid said, oh, that's amazing. Another kid said, oh, he's lucky. I'd get a smack. I moved on at that point because I think the parent was there. I said, but it doesn't stop there.

[12 : 24] Imagine if the parents kept going and gave another bag and another bag and another bag and another bag. You're wondering how many I've got. I don't know. And I'll stop there.

All that. And as I was kind of putting down the bags, there was one kid in the front whose eyes with every bag was getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And finally, at the end, I heard him whisper this.

Wow. But that's poor here in verse seven and eight. The riches of his grace that he lavished on us. Wow.

God's generosity is enormous. No wonder poor praises God. So we have election. We have adoption. We have redemption. And the next blessing is revelation.

That is, God has revealed to us his plan. And will for the world. So verse eight to ten. He says, with all wisdom and understanding, God made known to us the mystery of his will.

[13 : 25] According to his good pleasure. And which he purposed in Christ. To be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment. That is to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth.

Under Christ. He got us revealed or made known to us his will for the world. His plan. So what is this plan?

Well, it's to bring all things, including all people, under Christ. Christ is Lord now. But not all people submit to him as Lord.

But that's where our world is heading. It's heading to the day in the fullness of time, verse 10, where everyone will submit to Christ.

To his Lordship. This means that Jesus is the focal point of the universe. Did you realize? He is the destination to which everything and everyone is moving. He is the one in whom everyone will find their identity, whether as a son of God or as an enemy of God.

[14:28] He is the one before whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess as Lord.

Whether willingly as a Christian or unwillingly as a non-Christian. When the fullness of time comes, everyone will see that life is all about Jesus.

Some years ago in Sydney, my parents' church were doing an evangelistic campaign with a few other churches around. And the catchphrase of the campaign was, Jesus all about life.

Because that's what he gives. So on the next slide is a picture of the poster that they had. Mum and Dad had one at their house. And I was outside the church and so on. And that is true. Jesus brings life.

Life eternal. But what Paul is actually saying here in verse 10 is actually the reverse. So the next slide is also saying that life is all about Jesus. He not only brings us life, but the life we live is all about him.

That's what God is doing in the world. Bringing all things together under Christ. And God has already begun to work towards this plan, hasn't he? God has already begun to gather people under Christ and to grow them up in Christ.

[15:38] This is what the next couple of chapters of Ephesians are really all about. But it's in our passage too. Have a look at verse 11. Here Paul speaks about we Jews and you Gentiles.

So keep an eye out for the pronouns, the we and you. He says, verse 13, In Christ we Jews 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 Jews, who were the first to put our hope in Christ. I mean, the disciples were all Jews. They were the first ones. Might be for the praise of his glory. And you Gentiles in Ephesus also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Now I know it's we Jews and you Gentiles because the rest of the letter makes that clear. But you see what Paul is saying here? He's saying that we've come to faith through Christ, but you also were included.

You were gathered together with us within Christ through the preaching of the gospel. Chapters 2 and 3 make it even clearer. So I think on the next slide is a verse from chapter 3, verse 6, where God's plan that was once a mystery, but now has been made known.

[16:58] And it says, This mystery is that, this is his plan, through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs, notice, together with Israel. Members together of one body.

And sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. You can't get much clearer than that, can you? God's mission is to gather people together under Christ through proclaiming the gospel.

And it's not just to gather people together, but also to grow them up in Christ. So on the next slide is chapter 4, verse 15, where Paul talks about speaking the truth in love.

We, so that's everyone speaking the truth in love, which is the truth of the gospel in love. We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head unto Christ, he says.

You see, God is on about gathering and growing people in Christ as we speak the truth of the gospel in love. And now that we have this revelation, it gives us purpose in life.

[18:03] I mean, people often say, I wish God would just tell me what to do with my life. And at one level, he has. It's to grow like Christ. It's to do what you can to gather people to Christ.

And then he gives us a whole lot of freedom to work out the details, like what job, where to live, and the like. I know we want instruction about all that as well, but I suspect he gives us freedom. So that we'll be forced to trust in him and depend on him in prayer and things like that.

Otherwise, we just follow blindly and our faith wouldn't grow. But he has given us the big picture, you see. And all that, if this is what God is on about, then this is what we're to be on about.

If this is God's mission in the world, then it's to be our mission in the world. And can I say, I'm so thankful for the way so many people at HCD use their gifts, their time, their money, to partner with God in seeing people gathered to Christ and growing in Christ.

You see, although we are in different life situations, we are all to use whatever we can to get on board with God's plan. And we're to use whatever time or gifts or opportunities, including money, to

partner God in his mission to gather and grow people in Christ.

[19 : 20] As a church, I am hoping that we can plant some new congregations in 2019. I've been working towards that this year. I'm not sure if it's going to come off or not.

But before we do any of that, we need to be clear about what we're on about, don't we? There's no point in planting a new congregation off-site if we're not clear about why or what we're doing. And so with the parish council's approval, I'm changing our mission statement. I came up with it with Andrew, so I'm an equal contributor. I hope you don't mind, Andrew, because it's already changed. And I'm going to change it to something that we can remember, because as I spoke with people, one out of ten could remember what it was. And we need to remember it so we can be clear about what we're doing. So on the next slide is what it's going to be, to gather and grow in Christ. I wonder where I got that one from. Because we see it here in Ephesians, don't we? That's God's mission. Of course, whenever we shorten something, we lose things, don't we?

[20 : 25] And so on the website, there'll be a fuller version coming out, like on the next slide. So really, the vision is where you want to end up. That's technically what a vision is. In the Bible, it's a world that glorifies God.

The mission is broadly how you get there, and that's to gather and grow in Christ. And the means is more specifically, and again, we see it in Ephesians, by prayerfully proclaiming and promoting God's word in love, the truth in love.

But this shorter mission statement will start to appear around the place. In fact, it's already on your bulletins. This is God's mission. This is what we're to be on about. The final blessing is assurance. So have a look at verse 13.

So halfway through verse 13, that's where we're up to. Paul writes to the Ephesians, he says, Here Paul writes that when the Ephesians heard the gospel and believed in Jesus, when they became Christians, they were included in Christ, and they were given the Spirit.

And the Spirit, verse 13, is spoken of like a seal, like a wax seal that marks us as God's people, or verse 14, as God's possession.

[21 : 49] And not possessions to use and abuse, but treasured possessions, like God spoke of Israel in our first reading. And as we ourselves watch over and protect our treasured possessions, so too does God watch over and protect us.

He will ensure that we make it home to heaven. Indeed, the Holy Spirit not only seals us as God's treasured possession, but he guarantees our heavenly inheritance.

You see verse 14 again? Again, the Spirit is spoken of as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance. It's like when you buy a house, isn't it? You put a deposit down which guarantees it's yours.

No one else can buy it. And then you've got the settlement period where you have to wait before you can move in. Well, the Spirit is like a deposit or a down payment who guarantees our inheritance.

It's actually a taste of our inheritance. And yes, we have to wait for the settlement period before we can fully move in. But it's ours.

[22 : 54] The Spirit guarantees it. And so we have this guarantee or this blessing of assurance, you see. The Spirit is a seal and a deposit which guarantees our heavenly inheritance.

It's assurance. And no other religion can give that kind of assurance. Some years ago, I was helping a church out, handing out some leaflets for a community event.

We were doing mission at this church and they used us as cheap labor. I think we're going to use RMIT as cheap labor too. So it swings in roundabouts. But I was handing out the leaflets to this church event and I was at a set of shops and there was this Indian lady out the front of her shops just having a smoke.

So I gave her a leaflet and we got chatting. She was a Hindu. I heard about her faith and a bit about Hinduism. And then I explained my faith in Christ. And then I added, because of Jesus, I can be absolutely certain of going to heaven when I die and enjoying a new creation when Jesus returns. And it was at that point when I mentioned my certainty that her ears pricked up. I mean, I don't know if you've ever had this experience. You're talking the gospel with anyone. They can only half tune in.

[24 : 05] They're kind of looking around. They're not really interested. But at that point, she was really interested. And I remember vividly her eyes focusing on me and she stared at me for what seemed like a while. But then she said, does Jesus really give you that assurance, she meant?

Yes, I said. She paused and then she said, where's this church that teaches about Jesus? Now, I don't know if she went to the event or she became a Christian.

But the point is, she knew that Hinduism offers no such assurance. In fact, no other religion does apart from Christianity. In other words, we have hope that no matter what happens in this life, our life to come is secure.

No wonder Paul praises God. But as I said, these blessings are only available in Christ. Paul repeats the idea 12 times in 14 verses. Just so we get the point, he says in Christ or in him or through his blood, 12 times in 14 verses.

And so if we want these blessings that last longer than any earthly blessing, these blessings that show us how loved and special we are, these blessings which give us purpose in life now and certain hope for life to come, then we must come to Christ.

[25 : 20] They're only available in him. So the first question for us tonight is, have you come to Christ? Have you put your faith and your trust in him? Because if you don't believe in him, then you won't receive any of these blessings.

But for those of us who do believe in Jesus, then we have every single one of them. We've got them all, which is extraordinary. And no wonder Paul praises God.

And so too are we. In fact, this is the purpose of receiving these blessings, that we might praise God to the praise of his glory and grace as we sung before.

In fact, three times in this passage, verse 6, verse 12 and verse 14, we are told that God has done all this so that we might praise him, praise his glory, praise his character, honour him, in other words.

Now, I realise that all that we've seen tonight is very familiar, as I said before. And so we can take them for granted, can't we? But don't.

[26 : 26] Take some time to reflect on them, to remember all that God has given you in Christ, so that you might praise him in thankfulness, not only with your lips, but in your lives as well, by the way you live for him and honour him.

Well, I need to finish. I'll finish with something that happened to me just about two weeks ago. I was visiting one of our parishioners. Sorry, Anglican speak for a church member.

She's a person who can't come to church anymore. She cannot walk. I've mentioned to her before, I think. But she lives in this nursing home.

It's a very small room, smaller than a bedroom. She now has to have someone to feed her. She is mentally there, but she is surrounded by people in the nursing home who are not.

And so she often has people who walk through the door and start doing things, and she's got to call out to the nurse to get them out before they hurt her, things like that. She's got no money.

[27 : 33] And, well, to be honest, she doesn't have many physical blessings. And yet when I saw her a couple of weeks ago, I walked in and she was listening to a sermon from John's Gospel, from the crucifixion narrative.

And it was Paul Barker was speaking, a former vicar here. And she said, I listen to your sermons too, Andrew. It's okay. And she said, Andrew, I just can't believe what Jesus did for me.

And I'm sitting here thinking, I can't believe you're so thankful when you're surrounded by this life.

But, you see, she knew the spiritual blessings were the ones that mattered, and she had them.

And so despite the lack of physical ones, she was still willing to give thanks and praise God. And that's what we did. And I left meeting with her being more encouraged than I encouraged her, I suspect.

So we're going to praise God now together. We're going to say another prayer of thanksgiving, which is different to what we said at the start. And it picks up some of the themes we've looked at tonight. So it should appear on the next slide.

[28 : 43] So I invite you now to pray this prayer. So together. Almighty and merciful Father, Father, we give thanks and praise for all your loving kindness to us.

We praise you for creating us and sustaining us and all the blessings of this life. But above all, we praise you for your immeasurable love seen in the giving of your son to redeem us from sin, to bring us into your family and to give us the certain hope of glory.

Give us, we pray, such a sense of all your blessings, that our hearts may be truly thankful and that we may praise you not only with our lips, but with our lives as well, serving you in holiness and righteousness all the days of our lives.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.