

The Blessings that Matter Most

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[0 : 00] As Mark said, we're beginning a new series in the book of Ephesians in the Bible, and I wanted to start with this question. Have you ever looked at the blessings others have in life and felt a bit disappointed about the ones you have or don't have?

I'd love to have a bit more Queensland sun during the Melbourne winter yesterday, and today looks beautiful, doesn't it? But then I'd check my phone and tomorrow's back to Melbourne wet and grey. Or perhaps the blessing of a better job or money, better health or body, or better freedom or liberty. I mean, at the moment, it would be nice to have the blessing of more freedom, wouldn't it? Perhaps like WA or South Australia or Tassie. Last Sunday, actually, there was an article on the ABC, about Pitcairn Island in the South Pacific that's COVID-free and an idyllic place to be.

And that sounds like quite a nice blessing to have at the moment, isn't it? And so today we begin a new series, as I said, in the book of Ephesians, so named because the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to a church in Ephesus, a city which still exists today in Turkey.

[1 : 26] And the letter speaks about our privileged place in God's plan, which is why it's the title for our series. But it's a plan centred on Christ, and it's a place that calls us to live a life worthy of it.

And so the first three chapters speak about our privileged place in God's plan, especially for us non-Jews, who the Bible calls Gentiles, who have even less claim on God's blessings than others. And then the next three chapters talk about how to live a life worthy of the calling, that is the calling to this privileged place we've received.

And so Ephesians is all about our privileged place in God's Christ-centered plan and how to live in response to it. And as we see afresh our privileged place, then it helps us to know our true worth as God's church.

Because it's a worth that our world is seeing as less and less valuable these days. Our worth in the world's eyes is dropping dramatically, isn't it?

[2 : 46] Or with today's passage, it helps us to remember how blessed we are, especially when we might feel disappointed by the blessings we don't have in our lives.

Because today Paul begins by reminding us that we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. That's a point one, verse three.

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.

Now they're called spiritual blessings because they're given by the Holy Spirit. But also because they're found in the heavenly realms, which is a spiritual reality.

A reality where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. A reality which people sometimes can sense when they see things they can't explain.

[3 : 52] Or which we can sense when we see Christ's rule in the world or in our lives. You know, perhaps those coincidences or God incidences.

But it's generally a reality we cannot see because it's spiritual. But nonetheless, it's real. Yet the really important place these blessings are found is at the end of verse three.

Notice in Christ. Our blessings are connected to Christ. He is Abraham's ultimate descendant. Like we heard in our first reading, remember God promised Abraham that all peoples of the earth would be blessed through him.

How? He. Christ. Because Christ is Abraham's ultimate descendant. And in Christ, we have every spiritual blessing.

That's why Paul repeats this idea of in Christ or in him ten times in our passage. That's why these blessings are found in the heavenly realms. Because that's where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

[5 : 06] These spiritual blessings are found in Christ. And notice in verse three again, we have every one of them. Every spiritual blessing on offer.

Every spiritual blessing there is. Every spiritual blessing found in Christ. They are all ours now. Did you realize?

In 1989, the rock band Queen released that single, I Want It All, I Want It All, I Want It Now, which is pretty much the anthem of the younger generations today.

They want everything now, don't they? But when it comes to the spiritual blessings, the anthem is really, we have them all. We have them all.

We have them now. And that's a pretty privileged position to be in, isn't it? No wonder Paul praises God.

[6 : 03] And so what are these blessings that make us so privileged then? Well, Paul now unpacks some of them. Point to verse four. Here is the blessing of election.

That is, God chose or elected us to be holy and blameless in his sight, to inherit his kingdom, to be part of his people.

Now, of course, we also need to believe in Jesus, as the passage will say later on in verse 13. But even before we did, God chose or elected us.

In other words, before the creation of the world, God had you in his mind, which is pretty amazing, isn't it? And that makes us incredibly special, doesn't it?

I remember at school playing lunchtime soccer, and you'd always have the two good players as the captains, and they'd pick teams from the group of kids. Now, at school, I wasn't a particularly athletic kid.

[7 : 22] I'm still not as an adult, actually. But I remember one lunchtime with the two captains picking the teams, and one of them was the best soccer player in the school, and he chose or elected me.

I was so excited. It was the best day of school ever. But how much more so to be chosen or elected by God, to be on his team?

No wonder Paul praises God. But wait, there's more. Our election leads to our adoption, verse 5 and 6.

In love, God 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 Christ, whom he loves.

So here is the blessing of adoption. In love, God predestined or elected us to be adopted. And our adoption, it says, is to sonship, which is not a comment about gender.

[8 : 29] It's a comment about privilege. Because in the ancient world, it was the firstborn son who was the privileged one.

He got the father's inheritance. He took over the father's business. He received the father's blessings. Well, God has adopted us as equal firstborn sons with Christ.

So everything that Christ receives, we receive. His inheritance, his blessings, even his father's business of ruling in the new creation.

Some of them we can enjoy now, like being able to call God our father. Some of them we can enjoy later, like ruling with Christ in the new creation. But our adoption to sonship is a blessing we have now.

And it means in God's eyes, we are as precious to God as his only son, Christ.

[9 : 35] Did you realize that? Just as precious. You can't get any more privilege than that, can you? No wonder Paul praises God.

But wait, there's more. To be adopted means there needs to be a payment made. A redemption, if you like. It's just like adoption these days.

Kids need to be redeemed from the state or from an orphanage, which is not cheap. We have some friends who have adopted three children, and they've told us that it's cost them thousands of dollars, particularly when they try to adopt initially from overseas.

And like adoption these days, the kids don't pay the price of redemption, do they? That someone else pays, which means it's an act of grace.

You see, adoption involves redemption paid by another, which is an act of grace. And it's the same with us. So verse 7, You see, here is the blessing of redemption paid by another, by Christ and his blood, which is an act of God's grace.

[11 : 04] In fact, it's so gracious, Paul speaks of God's rich grace, doesn't he? That God lavished on us. Which, when you think about it, is so true.

I mean, our redemption costs God a whole lot more than a few thousand dollars, didn't it? It cost him the blood of his only son, and God willingly paid it, and Christ willingly gave it.

It still is amazing grace, isn't it? No wonder Paul praises God. But wait, there's more. Not only election to adoption, to redemption, God has also revealed his plan to us.

Revelation. See the verse 8 to 10? Here is the blessing of revelation.

God has revealed or made known to us the mystery of his plan or will. In other words, we now know what God is on about in this world.

[12 : 33] People often say, what on earth is God doing in our world? Well, this is what he's doing. He is working to unite or gather all things in Christ and bring them under Christ and his loving lordship.

As our mission statement says at the bottom right hand of your screens there, it's about gathering and growing people in Christ. You see, Jesus is the focal point of the universe.

Jesus is the destination to which everything and everyone is moving, whether things in heaven or on earth. So when the fullness of time comes, when he returns, everyone will find their identity in Christ, whether as his brothers and sisters or as his enemies.

And everyone will call him Lord, whether willingly as Christians or unwillingly as non-Christians.

God's master plan is all about gathering everything and everyone together under Christ. I know COVID has kiboshed all our plans, hasn't it?

[13 : 53] Whether it's been birthday parties or weddings, holidays or simply seeing friends and family. COVID has prevented our plans from happening.

But it hasn't prevented God's plan from happening. This year, we've had people become Christians during COVID. We've had baptisms.

In fact, even tonight, we're supposed to have a confirmation service where a number of teenagers would stand up and publicly declare that they believe in Jesus, which for a teenager is not easy, is it?

I mean, it's not easy for us adults. You see, despite COVID, God's plan to gather and grow people in Christ is still happening.

And this revelation of God's plan is a blessing because it gives us direction in life. Sure, it doesn't tell us which specific job to pursue or who to marry or not marry and that sort of thing, which road to take.

[15 : 01] But it does give us general guidelines. Like, will that job or road or significant other help or hinder us to be part of God's plan to grow in Christ?

A friend of ours turned down a promotion at work because she knew that constant travel would take her away from church family and gradually away from Christ.

You see, God's plan shaped her plans. And it should shape ours too. Whether it's planning to make time to read the Bible during the week or perhaps even planning to buy a guide to help you read the Bible during the week, that you might grow more under Christ.

Or whether it's planning to pray for people's health or study or work for sure, but also planning to pray for their soul, that they might turn to Christ for the first time or keep growing in Christ.

Or planning to use some of our time and money to help others find their identity and worth in Christ.

You know, by serving at church when we can, or giving money to gospel ministry as we can.

[16 : 18] The point is, this revelation is a blessing because it gives us direction in life. It helps us to shape our plans if we let it.

Or do our plans take priority over God's? You know, so that we're happy to live under Christ's loving lordship when it suits our plans and preferences, but not so much when it doesn't.

And I know this revelation is a blessing if we let it shape our plans. But wait, there's still more blessing to come. This time, inclusion.

So verse 11. In Christ we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to 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.

[17 : 21] I said at the start that Ephesians is about our privileged place in God's Christ-centered plan. But our privilege is even more pronounced when we remember that we non-Jews, we Gentiles, were even less deserving than the Jews.

At least the Jews had a history of God being their God. We have nothing. I mean, no one is deserving, but we are even less deserving, you see. And did you notice the language of we and you on your screens there?

So in verse 12, Paul says that we Jews, who were the first to become Christians, the first to put their hope in Christ, and in verse 13, and you Gentiles were included in Christ when we heard the gospel, the truth about Jesus.

And the point is, we Gentiles have this blessing of inclusion, such that we're equal with God's first people, the Jews, if we believe the gospel about Jesus.

And so do you. Do you believe in Jesus? Because if you don't, then you won't experience any of these blessings.

[18 : 48] They're all in Jesus, in Christ. But if we do, then we have every one of them. Election, adoption, redemption, revelation, inclusion, and assurance.

I couldn't make assurance into a shun word, but it's there in the rest of verse 13 and 14. Have a look there. It says, when you believed in Jesus, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing, there's our assurance, guaranteeing our inheritance and to the redemption of those who are God's possession, to the praise of his glory.

You see, the spirit has not only given us these spiritual blessings, but the spirit also guarantees our inheritance, gives us the blessing of assurance.

Why? Well, two ways. Firstly, the spirit acts as a seal on us as God's people. It's kind of like those wax seals that you see kings use on letters in the ancient days or olden times.

I like on your screen. The wax seal showed who the letter belonged to, the king. And so it also prevented people from tampering with it. Because if they tried to, the seal would crack and they would be punished by the king.

[20 : 16] And so the seal effectively ensured safe delivery of the letter. We are the letter. The spirit is like the seal.

The spirit shows who we belong to, to God as his treasured possession. And so it guarantees our safe delivery to heaven, to our inheritance in the new creation.

And secondly, the spirit is also described as a deposit that guarantees our inheritance. He is like God's down payment on us. Imagine you're buying a car and you put a deposit on the car.

The deposit guarantees the car is yours. No one else can buy it. But it also guarantees the car that you're going to bring it home. Because you're not going to waste your deposit, are you?

Well, we are like the car. And the spirit is like that deposit. It not only signals that we are God's possession, his treasured possession, but it guarantees that God will bring us home.

[21 : 24] This is the assurance we have. And it really is a blessing, especially in the face of suffering and death. I mean, there are very few things in life these days that are certain, aren't there?

I mean, we don't even know if we're going to be in lockdown in the coming weeks or not. But our eternal life, our inheritance is certain, which is a real comfort, especially if we suffer loss in life or face death in this world.

For we know our certain inheritance will more than make up for it all. In fact, we've had a number of people pass away at our church over the last month or so.

Another one passed away at the beginning of this week, actually. And yet for them all, this assurance has meant they knew where they were going. And it actually helped their loved ones to let them go.

Now, don't get me wrong. It's, it's extremely hard to lose a loved one. And it remains hard even years later. But God's guarantee brings comfort, doesn't it?

[22 : 42] But the non-Christian funeral is hopelessly hard. Because there's no assurance. There's only wishful thinking. Now, at this stage, you might be thinking, well, these spiritual blessings are all well and good, but it'd still be nice to have some physical blessings in this life.

I mean, how about a little less stress and a bit more money? How about the blessing of a little less suffering and a bit more health? Or a little less COVID and a bit more freedom?

How perhaps the blessing of a place on time, Pitcairn Island would be nice at the moment. But here's the thing. Even when we get those physical blessings in this life, they don't last long, do they?

I mean, when Michelle started working, we had more money coming into our bank balance, but then we had more bills to pay. The money still seemed to go out of the bank quicker than it came in. I don't know if that's your experience or not.

And even when we build a healthy superannuation balance, it doesn't last. Or if we get some good health, then something else happens. Our health doesn't last. Our job satisfaction doesn't last.

[24 : 00] Our holidays, sadly, don't last. And even our freedom doesn't last. Lockdown number six. Now, don't get me wrong.

We need some of these physical blessings. And God does give us some. He doesn't promise them, but he does give us some. So they're still good. I should say, God does promise the basics, you know, food and clothing and shelter and so on.

So these physical blessings are still good. It's just that the spiritual blessings are better. Because first, they do last.

They're secure in Christ in the heavenly realms. No one can take them from us. We can't lose them. But second, because they lead to life in a world to come, where we'll enjoy all the physical blessings that will last.

In the new creation. You see, our election, our adoption, our redemption, inclusion and assurance, those spiritual blessings all mean and all will lead to an eternity of life to the full in the world to come.

[25 : 14] And so it's these ones that really matter. So which would you rather? The physical blessing of physical health? That might last a hundred years.

I doubt it, but might last a hundred years. Or the spiritual blessing of election? That leads to perfect health for an eternity of years.

Or which would you rather? The physical blessing of a healthy bank balance that might last a hundred years? Or the spiritual blessing of adoption? Or the spiritual blessing of adoption? That leads to sharing in Christ's riches for an eternity of years?

Which would you rather? Or which would you rather? Physical blessing of freedom from lockdown that might last a hundred years? Our last lot of freedom lasted less than two weeks between lockdown five and six?

Or would you rather the spiritual blessing of assurance that guarantees physical freedom for an eternity of years? Which would you rather?

[26 : 20] It's easy to focus on our immediate problems and think, If only we had this or that physical blessing now. But even if we did, they don't last, do they?

And they don't make, because they don't last, they don't make a lifetime of difference. But the spiritual blessings do last and lead to an eternity of difference.

And so these spiritual blessings are really the ones that matter most. And in Christ, we have every one of them. And no wonder Paul praises God.

Which is really the big application for us this morning. To remember these blessings in Christ, that we might praise God in life. I'll say that again, to remember these blessings in Christ, that we might praise God in life.

In fact, this idea of praise is repeated throughout the passage, as you can see on your screens there. In fact, God has blessed us for this purpose, that we might be for the praise of his glory.

[27 : 31] That we might praise God with our lips, whether thanking him in prayer, or praising him in song, which we'll do shortly, or praising God with our lives, by reflecting his character, or honoring him with our actions.

And so if you're feeling disappointed about the blessings you don't have, or the ones you do have, but you don't feel that they're all that great, then remember the blessings we all have in Christ.

That they are the ones that matter most, and you have every one of them. Remember the blessings we have in Christ, that you might continue to praise God in life.

As that old hymn goes, when you look at others with their lands and gold, remember Christ has promised you his wealth untold.

Count your many blessings, money cannot buy, your reward in heaven, and your home on high. Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your blessings, see what God has done.

[28 : 39] Well, let's pray. Praise be to you, our God and Father, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms, with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Help us to remember that these are the blessings that matter most, and that we have every one of them in Christ, so that we might continue to praise you in life.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.