

Thanks be to God

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0:00] Well, last week, our daughter Caitlin received her very first iPhone. Now, because I'm a bit of a cheapskate, it wasn't actually brand new.

It was one of our old ones that we had repaired. And it wasn't her birthday, actually. It was because I forgot to pick her up from a dance class she was having, and she was stranded for an hour and couldn't ring me.

Now, I'd like to think that I'll never forget her again, but my wife said, oh, it's probably safer if we just buy her a phone. Okay. And so once she got this phone, she was looking forward to it with great anticipation.

And once she got it, this is her reaction, which I'll show you with her permission. It's on the video. Let's see if it works. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. You're best.

Yeah. Yeah. Clearly, she's excited, and she says thank you there. And at the end, she said, you're the best. To which I said, keep it going.

[1:02] She didn't. But the point is, joy and thankfulness often lead to praise. For my daughter, it was saying, you're the best. And today is Thanksgiving Sunday, as you know.

And although our passage today doesn't actually 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.

Do you see verse 3 there? He says, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul is so overwhelmed with joy and thankfulness that he praises God without stopping for breath.

It's hard to see in our English translation, but in the Greek language that Paul wrote in, verse 3 to verse 14, it's actually one long sentence.

202 words without a full stop. Paul is so excited that he cannot pause for breath, you see. What's more, he's actually in prison when he writes this.

[2:10] And yet, he understands all that God has given him, so much so that he can still praise God with thankfulness despite being in prison. And so what has God given him?

Well, it's not an iPhone, but it is verse 3, Who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. You see that?

God has given Paul and all Christians every spiritual blessing in Christ. Now, notice a few things here about verse 3. First, they are called spiritual blessings, as opposed to physical ones, because they are given through the Holy Spirit.

Second, these blessings are found in Christ, it says. That is, we must come to Christ if we want to receive them. They're only available in him.

Third, they are also in the heavenly realms, it says, verse 3, as opposed to the earthly realms of this world. That is, they are part of God's eternal kingdom that has begun now and will continue forever.

- [3 : 18] In other words, these spiritual blessings will last for an eternity. Most people in this world chase after the blessings of this life, such as health, wealth and happiness, but they do not last because they belong to the earthly realm, to this world.
- We cannot take them when we die. What's more, they are not even guaranteed when we live. Our money often goes more quickly than it comes, does it not? That's my experience.
- And our health can go up and down, but often more down as we get older. That's my experience too. Our possessions often break.
- Our jobs are not always secure. You see, these earthly blessings are limited in length and certainty, but not so with the spiritual blessings. For these are the ones which are in the heavenly realms that belong to the eternal kingdom, and so they will last forever.
- Putting worldly terms, they provide a great return for your investment, if you like. In other words, these are the blessings that are really worth having.
- [4 : 31] Fourth, notice in verse 3 that God has already given them to us. You see that? The word blessed is in past tense. And so although these blessings are part of God's eternal kingdom and the world to come, we can begin to enjoy them now.
- The kingdom has already come in Christ, and we can begin to enjoy these blessings now. Fifth, we have all of them. Do you notice? It says, not you've been blessed with some spiritual blessings, but with every spiritual blessing in Christ.
- And as I've said before, if we have every spiritual blessing in Christ, then how many do we lack? None. Instead, we've got them all. There's a rock band around in the 70s or 80s, I think it was, who had a hit song called, We Will, We Will Rock You.
- Can anyone remember the name of that band? Queen. Some people can, some people can't. I think there's a slide on the next slide. Yeah, Queen. But they had another hit that says, I want it all, I want it all, I want it now, which kind of sums up the age that we live in.
- But when it comes to these spiritual blessings, you can rephrase it to say, We've got them all, we've got them all, we've got them now. No wonder Paul praises God.
- [5 : 49] And as he does so, he starts to list some of these blessings, which are on your outline. So the first one is election or being chosen. Verse 4, Do you see that?
- God chose us, elected us. Before the creation of the world, God chose you to inherit his kingdom. Even though he knew we would sin, even though he knew we would not deserve it, even though he knew it would cost him his only son, he still chose us to believe in Christ.
- To be counted as holy and blameless in his sight, even though we're not in our lives. In other words, before the creation of the world, and out of all people in the world, God had you in mind.
- God, it's extraordinary when you think about it. There was a boy from 1030 Church who was one of four people out of all of Australia to be chosen to go and be a ball boy in the tennis championships in Japan, I think it was, Japan or China, I can't remember which.
- One of four out of all of Australia. I tell you what, he knew how special he was. Of course, he had to work hard for it. You're actually trained to be a ball boy. He had to work hard for it.
- [7 : 11] But when it comes to be chosen by God, we don't work hard for it. It's before we were even born, before the creation of the world. And yet he chose us to believe in him. Does that not tell you how special and privileged we are?

What's more, God chose us not just to be a friend, but to be part of the family, which brings us to the second blessing of adoption. Do you see verse 5 and 6? He says, He predestined us, sorry, in love, He predestined us, or chose 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.

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, this is an extraordinary privilege that we often are so familiar with that we forget how extraordinary it is.

We can approach God of the universe anytime we like, anywhere we like, and call Him Father. I mean, all the powerful leaders of the world, kings, queens, presidents, prime ministers, there's a protocol you have to go through.

You can't just go in and see them anytime you like. I was told by someone who visited the Queen that there was lots of different things they had to go through, and the master of the house even told them how to address the Queen.

[8 : 35] It was either your majesty or ma'am like jam. That was the phrase he used. Not mom, but ma'am like jam, apparently. And yet, we have the most powerful leader of the universe, God, whom we can approach anytime, anywhere we like, and call Father, because we are now His adopted sons.

sons. And sons is important. It's not a comment about gender. It's a comment about privilege. You see, in the ancient world, it was the sons who received the inheritance.

In fact, in your Bibles, there's a footnote next to the word sonship which tells you that. And so, we, as His adopted sons, will share in the inheritance that belongs to Christ, the true Son.

A friend of mine called Simon grew up with two adopted children in his family. His parents had children of their own, including Simon, of course, but they were acutely aware of the thousands 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 his family, they were treated as equals.

[9 : 44] They were loved equally, treated equally, given to equally. In fact, when Simon's father passed away and some of the inheritance was handed out, 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. Doesn't that tell you how much He loves you?

Especially when we remember what it costs God to adopt us. For Simon's parents, it costs about \$60,000 in flights, in fees, and the like, to adopt those two children from India.

But our adoption costs God much, much more, didn't it? It costs God the blood of His only Son. And not to buy us from India, but to redeem us from sin. Which brings us to the third blessing, that of redemption.

Do you see verse 7? It says, In Him, in Christ, we have redemption through or by His blood. The forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He has lavished on us.

[10 : 53] See, in order to adopt us, God had to pay the price to redeem us and forgive us. And that price was the blood of His Son. And we've got to remember that when God did that, we were actually His enemies.

We ignored Him. We were living against Him. Can you imagine giving up your son or your loved one to die for someone who hates you, who ignores you?

And yet, that's what God did for us. It's amazing grace, isn't it? Extraordinary generosity to give up what was most precious to Him for people who were His enemies.

That's why Paul describes God's grace in verse 7 and 8. He says, That this redemption came in accordance with or because of the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us.

You see the words He uses there? He's trying to capture God's abundant generosity. I did a children's talk a while ago here at church and I was trying to explain how great God's grace to us is.

[11:58] And so, I got this teddy bear which I've got down here. And this is what I did for the kids' talk. And I, it's Big Ted, so I pulled Big Ted out. I put him in the chair. All the kids were down the front here, so you can imagine all the kids down the front.

And I said, now look, Big Ted, he loves lollies, kids. Who loves lollies? And they all put up their hands, you know. And then I said, look, Big Ted's being naughty and so he doesn't deserve lollies, but imagine his mother still gave him a bag of lollies like that.

And some of the kids went, oh wow, that'd be great. You know, that's amazing. One kid piped up and said, oh that's great, I'd get a smack. I went, okay. We'll move along now.

The parents here. And I said, look, he didn't just get one bag of lollies, but he got another bag and he got another bag and he got another bag and then another bag.

And as I kept going, there was one kid's eyes. Every time a bag went down, his eyes got bigger and bigger and bigger. And when I'd finished, I saw this kid and his mouth whisper a silent, wow.

[13:11] But that's Paul's wow here. He's so overwhelmed by God's grace because he's taken a time to reflect on it that he's trying to use this language to say, wow, riches of his grace that he's lavished on us.

No wonder Paul praises God. And so we have election, adoption, redemption and the next blessing is revelation. That is God has revealed his plan and will for the world. Have a look at verse 8, the rest of verse 8 to 10.

With all wisdom and understanding, God made known to us the mystery of his will or plan according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ. And here is the plan to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

See, God has revealed or made known to us his will for the world. His plan. And that plan is to bring all things including all people under Christ.

Under his lordship. Under his headship. This is where our world is heading. It is heading to the day which will come in the fullness of time, verse 10, where all people will be under Christ's lordship.

[14:27] And this means that Jesus is now the focal point of the universe. Did you realize that? He is the destination to which everything and everyone is moving. He is the one in whom everyone will find their identity whether as an adopted son of God or as an enemy of God.

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 and has always been all about Jesus.

Some years ago in Sydney my parents' church joined with a few other churches in a campaign called Jesus All About Life. I think there is a picture of the poster that they had on the next slide there.

But what Paul is actually saying, that is true, but what Paul is actually saying here is the reverse which is on the next slide. That life is all about Jesus. Jesus not only brings life but our own lives is actually about him.

He is the focal point, the destination to which everyone is moving. And God has already begun to work out this plan by gathering people to Christ and under Christ and growing them up into Christ.

- [15:45] This is what the next couple of chapters in Ephesians are really about. So for example on the next slide, sorry not on the next slide, in your Bibles in verse 11, have a look there. And here notice the pronouns he starts talking about we Jews and then you Gentiles.

He says, 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 so that we Jews who were the first to put our hope in Christ might be for the praise of his glory.

Notice verse 13, and you Gentiles also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth that is the gospel of your salvation.

Did you see the pronouns there? We, you? Paul is talking about how through the same way God has brought together Jew and Gentile together, gathered them together as they've heard the word of truth, the gospel.

It's the same on the next slide now from chapter three, where Paul talks about how God's plan was once a mystery, but now it's being made known, and he says this mystery that's been now revealed is that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel.

- [17:02] See, he's gathering them together in Christ, members together of one body, sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. It's a bit hard to miss, isn't it?

God is gathering people together under Christ, chapter one, verse ten, through the proclamation of the gospel, and not just to gather them together, but also to grow them up into maturity.

So on the next slide, in chapter four, verse fifteen, that's what he talks about. He says, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, that is into Christ.

And speaking the truth there is the truth of the gospel. You see, God is on about gathering and growing people, just like he gathered Israel and brought them to himself from our first reading.

Now he's on about gathering and growing people in Christ, through or as the word of truth is spoken. And now that we have this revelation, it gives us purpose in life, does it not?

- [18:06] People say, look, I wish God would tell me what he wanted me to do with my life. And there is a sense in which he has. It's to grow like Christ.

That's his purpose for our lives. Yes, he does give us a lot of freedom to choose what that else involves, what job to do and that sort of thing. But he gives us freedom so that we might learn to depend on him and trust in him.

But he certainly told us the big picture for what he wants for us, that is to grow like Christ. And more than that, if this is what God is on about, then it's 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 to God, as people said earlier, I'm so thankful for you, for you people here who use your gifts, your time, your money to partner with God in seeing people gathered to Christ and then grow in Christ.

You see, although we are in different situations in life and we have different personalities, different gifts, we are to use whatever we can to get on board with God's plan. We're to use whatever time, gifts, opportunities and money that God gives us to partner with him in his mission.

- [19:22] In fact, as a church, I'm hoping, and I've been working towards this, I'm hoping we can plant a new congregation in 2019. We've pretty much maxed out our site here, and so I'm hoping we can plant a new congregation in 2019, and I've begun working on it this year.

But before we do any of that, we need to be clear about what we're on about in life. And there's no point planting a church if we're not clear about why or what we're doing.

And so with parish council's approval, I'm changing our mission statement. I came up with the other mission statement in part, and so I figure I'm allowed to do this, but as I asked around, people couldn't remember the other mission statement, and if you can't remember it, then how do you know what we're on about?

So I'm changing it to the next slide. To gather and grow in Christ. Do you think you remember that? To gather and grow in Christ, because that's what we see here in Ephesians.

That's what God is on about. That's his mission, and so it should be ours too. Of course, whenever you shorten anything to make it easier to remember, you lose things, and there'll be a full version coming out on our website, like on the next slide.

[20:32] So vision is technically where you want to end up, and the Bible says we're heading to a world that glorifies God. God's word in the world. The mission is to gather and grow in Christ, and the means is by prayerfully proclaiming and promoting the gospel, God's word in love, and we see all that in Ephesians.

This is where we're heading. But right now, we're going to head on to our final blessing, which is the blessing of assurance. Have a look in verse 13. So halfway through verse 13, he says, When you believed in the gospel, you Ephesians were marked in Christ with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession to the praise of his glory.

Here, Paul writes that when the Ephesians believed in Christ, when they heard the gospel, and believed in Christ, they were given the Holy Spirit. And that means that they now have assurance.

Why? Well, firstly, verse 13, the Holy Spirit is called a seal. It's like God marks us, stamps us as his people, his possession.

In fact, in our first reading, he called Israel his treasured possession. And that's what we are now. That's what the Holy Spirit marks us as, God's treasured possession. And like our own treasured possessions, which we watch over and protect, so God will watch over and protect us until he brings us home.

[22:08] In fact, I was going to bring a different teddy today, which was my daughter's treasure possession, but I was not allowed to. It was her treasured possession. So God will not let us go.

He will bring us home because we are his treasured possession. The Holy Spirit sealed us. But secondly, the Holy Spirit is like a deposit. Notice verse 14, that guarantees our heavenly inheritance.

It's like when you buy a house, you put down a deposit which guarantees it's yours. No one else can buy it. And then there's a settlement period and then you can move in. Well, the Spirit is a deposit or down payment who guarantees our inheritance.

And while we too have to wait for the settlement period before we can fully move in, it's ours now. And so we have this great blessing of assurance. The Spirit is a seal and a deposit which assures us that God will not let us go, that will make it home to heaven.

And no other religion gives this kind of assurance, this kind of blessing. And some years ago, in fact, I was helping a church hand out leaflets in the community and I was at a set of shops and there was a lady, an Indian lady who was at the front of the shop and she was just having a smoke and I handed her a leaflet and we just got chatting.

[23:20] And I explained what I was doing and I about the gospel and I explained that because of Jesus, I was absolutely certain of where I was going when I died, that I would go to heaven and then one day I would enjoy the new creation.

And when I mentioned my certainty, she kind of, her ears picked up, her eyes narrowed. I still remember vividly how she kind of just stared at me and paused from her.

I thought, oh, what have I said? She said, does Jesus really give you that assurance is what she meant. Yes, I said. She paused and then she said, where's this church again that teaches about Jesus?

You see, Hinduism offers no such assurance of life after death. Buddhism, Islam, no other religion but 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. He says, in Christ or in him or through his blood.

[24 : 28] 12 times in 14 verses. And so if we want these blessings that last longer than any earthly blessings, these blessings that show how loved and special we are, these blessings which give us purpose in life now and certain hope for life later, then we must come to Christ.

For they are only available in him. So the first question for us this morning is, have you done that? Have you put your trust in Christ? Have you come to him?

Do you believe in him? Because if you don't, then you won't have any of these blessings. But if you do believe in Jesus, then you have every single one of them. You've got them all, which is extraordinary.

And no wonder Paul praises God. In fact, so too are we to praise God. This is the purpose for receiving these blessings. There's a repeated phrase throughout this passage. I don't know if you notice, but it's to the praise of his glory.

Verse 6, verse 12, verse 14. We are told that God has done all this so that we might praise him for the blessings he's given us. Of course, I realize that they are so familiar that we can take them for granted, can't we?

[25 : 37] We can forget how extraordinary they are, but don't take them for granted. Take some time instead to reflect on them so that you might praise God in thankfulness, and not only with your lips, but in your lives as well.

I was visiting someone again recently, and she is in a very difficult situation, cannot walk, stuck in a nursing home, and not many physical blessings.

And yet, when we were chatting, she said, I've just been reading John's Gospel, and about the passion narrative, the crucifixion of Christ, and she was listening to Paul Barker on tape.

She quickly added, I listen to you too, Andrew, sometimes. But she said, oh, isn't it amazing what God has given us?

I thought, isn't it amazing that despite how little physical blessings you have, you're still so thankful and joyful, that you still praise God? You see, she didn't take them for granted, did she?

[26 : 41] She still praised God for all the blessings he gave her and us. We're going to do the same, and we're going to do it by saying another prayer of thanksgiving, a different one. It should be on the screen.

So let's respond by praying together. Almighty and merciful Father, we give you 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. Amen.