

Every Blessing

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[0 : 00] Well now, if you would open your Bibles to Ephesians chapter 1 on page 180, we begin today a series on this fantastic book.

And you can see on the yellow card that you received on the way and you can track our series and know where we're up to. Most commentators say something like this about Ephesians, it's the crown jewel of Paul's writings.

I find that a bit difficult. I don't think Paul wrote any bad books myself. But this is certainly the most mature and tightly wound of all his books because it's not an answer to any problem.

Most of Paul's letters are written answering a problem in a church, a church that's fighting with each other or a church that's not fighting with false teaching as it ought to be. And here is Paul.

He's in prison, probably in Rome around 61, 60, about 25, 30 years after the resurrection. This is the place where he spent most of his time in the book of Acts, the longest of his time.

[1 : 08] He knows the people there. He writes a circular to a group of churches like a lower mainland area around Ephesus and he tells them what is on his heart. It's like Paul on the porch.

It's not answering a problem. This is the apostles' most mature reflection on the gospel and it's magnificent stuff. It is the cure and antidote for narrowness, for self-preoccupation, for individualism.

It's an antidote for intellectual rationalism. It's very important, I think, as we come to this to see the big purposes of God for the church.

Just in the first 14 verses, he begins before creation and goes after the end of the world and he holds up Jesus Christ as the cosmic saviour and the sum and head of all things.

This is the one book in the New Testament that tells us more about the church than any other. The church is the body of Christ, the building of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the bride of Christ, the new humanity, the family of God.

[2 : 17] And perhaps more importantly, it says that the church is not just the pattern of the new heaven, but the church is the means by which God is using to fill the universe with all the fullness of Jesus.

And this letter is certainly mind-boggling, but there's nothing remote about it. In fact, it all leads to praise. It's a massive challenge, Ephesians. It's a challenge to any kind of superficial, worldly, self-centered, anemic, individual kind of spirituality.

It's a challenge for us to live large in the purposes of God and to praise him. And it comes to us from the mind of God, which is why Paul says in the first verse, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God.

Paul says, I didn't appoint myself to be an apostle. I was not a seeker. I was trying to kill Christians. But Jesus Christ appeared to me and God, the Father, revealed the gospel to me.

And therefore, as he writes, he writes with the words of the Holy Spirit. So as we come to these words today, brothers and sisters, and over the next weeks, we read them as though they have come from the mouth of the Holy Spirit himself.

[3 : 37] And you and I do not sit in judgment on these words. We submit ourselves to them or else they're not going to do us any good. So where does he start? Where do you start if you're in prison, writing to little, tiny churches, a motley bunch of persecuted, terribly in the minority, Christians around Ephesus?

Where do you begin? Well, here's the topic for the book. Verse 3 is like the statement of the book. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed, second time, us in Christ with every spiritual blessing, third time in the heavenly places.

The place he begins is in praise and glory and magnifying God. Nothing formal about this. Paul is not frightened of what anyone thinks.

And I think he begins in this way because he wants everyone who follows Jesus Christ to know this as the keynote of their life, that our lives would overflow with praise for God.

This is why we meet here week by week. We are learning from each other and we are learning from God how to praise him, how to be his people. And we've got massive reasons to praise God, haven't we?

[5 : 03] I mean, Vancouver is so beautiful after it rains. There's new snow on the mountain today and there are cherry blossoms running up and down the streets. But Paul says that's good, but he wants to lead us higher.

He wants us to know we are doubly indebted to God, not just for the blessings of this life, but he says for spiritual blessings, for the blessings of a new life, a new creation, adoption into his family. Or as he says in verse 3, he has blessed us, God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing, blessing, every, the whole thing.

In the heavenly places, which just means in spiritual reality. Paul says if you belong to Jesus Christ, you are most fortunate. If you take everything that the world has to offer and you put it into one box on one side and on the other side, the blessings that come in Jesus Christ, the scales go like this. This weighs absolutely nothing, this world. We are most fortunate. In Christ, God has given us everything for life and for happiness. And so Paul is happy and he's excited.

[6 : 18] And he says God is not a stingy God. He's not mean-fisted and tight-fisted, but he's given the whole lot to us in Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul is so excited that the first 14 verses are all one complicated sentence with phrases rolling over each other.

And the commentators give up, which is really helpful, really. One commentator called it a Greek monstrosity, which must have been a bad day for that commentator. That's what you do when you're excited.

Things roll over. So today we're going to look at verses 4, 5 and 6. There's more in that to keep us than just today.

And I want to ask three questions of those verses. What is the great blessing that Paul wants us to have in our hearts as he begins? What is it? Secondly, how does the blessing show itself today? And thirdly, why does he start with this blessing? And just a word of warning, the first point is by far the longest. I just tell you that so that you won't get disheartened.

[7 : 28] They're not all equal. The first point is long. So firstly then, what is the first and greatest blessing that God has given us? Verse 4. He's blessed us even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world.

There it is. The blessing is this. God chose us before the foundation of the world. Before time began, before God created the world, he chose us.

If you have faith in Jesus Christ, this is why. Ultimately, it's because God has chosen you and God has set his love on you.

It doesn't feel like that, does it? It doesn't feel like that when you become a Christian. It feels like you're taking this huge risk and choosing God. But when we do, God reveals to us and he turns to us and he says, the initiative was actually mine and I chose you first.

You think of Abraham. You know, did God look down and say, I'd like to find someone who'd make a really great saint and prophet, someone who's spiritually sensitive, someone who I can trust.

[8 : 35] Abraham was off worshipping the moon and making money. And God came to him and he spoke to him and he revealed himself and he called him and he chose him.

Well, think of the people of Israel. Did God look around and say, well, the Babylonians, they've got problems and the Egyptians, they've got problems, but Israel, oh, what a good people. Listen to God, what he says, why he chose them.

He says, It was not because you were more in number that the Lord chose you, set his love upon you and chose you. You were fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loves you and is keeping the promise that he swore to your fathers that the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of bondage.

It was nothing in Israel, nothing in their righteousness or virtue. It was everything in God that made him choose them. It was just because he set his love on them that he chose them before the foundation of the world.

And so it is with us, brothers and sisters. It is because of his initiative that we have come to him. It's not ours. It's because he set his love on us before the foundation of the world.

[9 : 48] There's nothing about us to commend ourselves to God. God didn't choose you because he thought you were likely to respond or because you were spiritually sensitive or you'd make a really great Christian.

If you have faith in Jesus Christ, it is because of his prior, free, sovereign, gracious choice of us. Now, of course we choose him and of course we exercise faith and place our faith in him. But when we do, Jesus turns to us and he says to us, as he did to the disciples in the upper room, you did not choose me, but I first chose you.

Because you see, in this whole salvation thing, the really important thing is not our choosing, but God's choosing. It is by him that we are saved.

If he left it up to us, we'd still be in the dark. We'd be utterly without him. Which means, of course, that if you've begun to trust Jesus, you ought to praise him and thank him that he set his love on you.

[10 : 55] It's a little bit like a baby. We've had baptisms this morning at 9 and 11. You think about the life of that child. When does the relationship between the parents and the child begin?

Most parents sing to their children and talk to their babies when their baby is still in utero. Some parents play music to the child so that the child will become a genius later on in life.

Hasn't worked for hours. The thing is, the relationship begins a long time before the child is even conscious. So it is with us.

It's not that God looked down on the world and was taken by surprise by the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden. Better think of plan B here. Before the foundation of the world, he knew and he chose because he saw that we were weak and enslaved to sin.

Now, here is the problem. The problem is when we try and systematize the things of God which are beyond us.

[12 : 02] The temptation for us is to try and take these mysteries of God and force them and squeeze them into a neat system so that every little bit fits. And you hear this in some of the systems, once saved, always saved.

You know, God is the machine. But we cannot reduce the incomprehensible mysteries of God down to our size. And when we do that, what we do is we fudge the mystery.

Let me mention two common fudges that I hear today. Some people say, well, God knows everything and he knew beforehand that I would choose him and therefore he predestined me. That's a fudge. Here's another one, very like it. Well, God does not choose anyone individually but he takes everyone who's in Christ and I get into Christ by my own cleverness and he chooses all those who are in Christ so I have to find my way into Christ and then God elects those who are in Christ.

But that turns election completely upside down and it empties what the word really means and it puts me at the centre, it makes me the strong one and God the weak one and in the end all God is doing is endorsing my decision which means the basis of my salvation is my choice which means I cannot have any assurance of faith.

[13 : 26] God massively underestimates our own sinfulness, our own spiritual darkness and it massively underestimates God's mercy and his grace and his goodness and besides the Bible explicitly tells us that God is the one who puts us in Jesus Christ.

When you see the election of God working in the scriptures it works individually. The twins Esau and Jacob before it says before they could do anything good or bad before they were even born God chose one and I think in the end fudging is cruel because it leaves salvation on my shoulders and it will lead to despair.

So, we need to go a bit deeper. Are you feeling some tension? I hope you are. And I think, let's go deeper.

There are two apparent contradictions for us and the first is to do with God's freedom and our freedom.

Let me put it this way. It's to do with our human freedom. See, if election is true what about my true human freedom? How can God hold us responsible for our choice if his choice overrides mine?

[14 : 52] What's the difference between election and a sort of a fatalistic, deterministic robot? What? And the problem here is that our minds have been deeply affected by sin and we think of

ourselves as independent from God.

We think we act independently and decide independently of God which is exactly what the serpent said to Eve in the garden if you disobey you'll be independent of God. But the opposite is true and it's because of sin we need to bring our hearts and minds back to the scriptures week by week constantly reawing ourselves to God's truth and here it is that the Bible teaches both that I am responsible for my actions and that God elects whom he chooses.

It teaches both that I have a human will and that God's will is sovereign. And the Bible gives lots of illustrations of it but it never ever explains the mystery.

And if you begin to think you understand it you don't. We can't. This has to do with God. That's the first apparent contradiction between my will and the will of God.

And the second apparent contradiction is this. Why doesn't God choose everybody? Why does God choose some and not others? Doesn't the Bible say that God longs for all to be saved?

[16:19] If that is true then why does Jesus say that only a few will be saved? It's an apparent contradiction between the character of God and the purpose of God.

See in the character of God he does desire that all be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth but in his purposes not everyone turns to him unless they are chosen and unless they are born anew.

And I say it's an apparent contradiction because God doesn't seem to have a problem believing both sides and the scripture doesn't have a problem teaching both sides and it nowhere resolves this apparent tension.

But God has told us both these things not for our philosophical speculation but so that we would bow down and worship him and say blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And I want to say to you if you are new at Christianity the Bible will create problems for you. It's not a book of answers to lots of your ten top philosophical questions.

[17:22] In fact if you become a Christian and follow and start to study the Bible it will raise more questions not than answers but more questions than you had before. And a lot of things to do with God are impossible for us to understand but you would expect that if God is God wouldn't you?

So the Bible teaches both that I have complete human responsibility and that God is divine and sovereign and both of those things live happily in the heart of God and I cannot give you a systematic way of putting them together.

And I don't think the Bible does. Famous Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon keep quoting Spurgeon I like Spurgeon he said he was asked a couple of centuries ago how do you reconcile human responsibility and divine sovereignty and he said why?

Why do I need to reconcile them? Because they're not enemies they're friends. They exist together happily in the heart of God. I think that's a clever answer. In the end we cannot understand this but what we must do is bring our hearts and submit to the truth and acknowledge that God is God and this understanding leads us into a larger and larger understanding of God's mystery and to bow before him and praise.

I wonder when you come to the scriptures whether you're suspicious of your own judgment and call on God to open your heart to real joy recognising that he is God. We rejoice brothers and sisters in election.

[18:49] It means that my salvation comes from nothing in me but from him from his pure goodness and grace and not from anything I've done. That's the what.

That's the first point. That's what is this great big blessing and I move secondly and briefly how does this blessing show itself today? And the answer in verse 5 is that we begin to show a family likeness as 5 he destined us in love to be his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will.

Again you may not feel it when you place your faith in Jesus Christ but the scriptures say you have been adopted into his family. He has given you if you will his own spiritual DNA.

You can now call God your heavenly father. You are now related to other Christian brothers and sisters and Jesus Christ himself is not ashamed to be identified with us.

In fact he's proud to be called brother and sister of you and me and all the inheritance all the privileges and rights of belonging to God now belong to us. Look at that.

[20:00] That's family likeness. Look at the way Paul says it in verse 4. He chose us in him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him. You see what God's

electing choosing does is it doesn't just restore us to the time before sin in the Garden of Eden.

It does far more than that. It gives us a new life and a new family and a new hope. It makes us sons and daughters and we begin to progressively become as we will be in heaven holy and blameless before him.

That is the way election shows itself today. That's why if anyone says the believing election makes you arrogant and lazy about sin they have not understood word one about election.

God chose us in him to be holy and blameless to begin to reflect the humility and love of Jesus Christ. That's how election begins to show itself real to us.

And I should warn you therefore that if you do not show any signs or desire to be holy and blameless you need to question question. So that is the blessing.

[21 : 10] How does it show itself today? And thirdly why does the apostle why does he share with us this blessing? And you think about it he could have started with Jesus on the cross he could have started with the gift of the Holy Spirit or the power of the resurrection working in our lives but he doesn't.

He begins with election. And I think he does it for two very good reasons. things. The first is to give us assurance. See God wants us to be gripped by his grace.

And if salvation rests on God and not on my pathetic and wobbly faith that goes up and down depending on all sorts of silly things then I can rest on him and nothing can shift me from that salvation.

If he has made me his son and he's made you his child based on what he's done in Jesus Christ then the choosing of you and me as his eternal children has never taken away.

It's the most secure thing in the universe. It's a brilliant thing. It's a great relief. God did not choose you because of your intelligence because you did something good or because you did something bad.

[22 : 21] It was before all that. He has no obligation to do this. He didn't owe it to us. There's nothing in us except his delight in us.

So I say again if Jesus Christ has become real to you if you've become to call God Father if you have a desire to be holy and blameless before him your heart this morning ought to flame into joy because you know that God has chosen you before the foundation of the world.

Now if you are struggling with this I want to commend to you something in the prayer book. So let's put the Bible down and turn to the prayer book for just a moment. Page 704-705.

When the preacher goes off track you always pick up the prayer book and read in the back the 39 articles. This is the longest of all the 39 articles and it's wonderfully it wonderfully describes the reality of predestination and election and I just the second paragraph which is in 705 let me read the first sentence there.

The godly consideration of predestination and our election in Christ is full of sweet pleasant and unspeakable comfort to godly persons such as feel in themselves the working of the spirit of Christ mortifying which means killing the works of the flesh and their earthly members and drawing up their minds to high and heavenly things as well as because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ as because it doth fervently kindle their love toward God.

[24 : 12] I probably need to finish the sentence. So for curious and carnal persons lacking the spirit of Christ to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God predestination is a most dangerous downfall whereby the devil doth thrust them either into desperation or into wretched wretchedness of most unclean living no less perilous than desperation.

Let's focus on the first half of the sentence a little more happy but it's very very wise I think the second half as well but you see the godly consideration of election is full of sweet pleasant and unspeakable comfort and I can tell you be a witness to that in my own Christian life as this doctrine became clearer to me as a young man it gave tremendous sweetness pleasant and unspeakable comfort but if you're struggling with it take that article away and that has some explanatory power so the first reason the apostle gives this to us is for our own assurance and I finish with this the second reason is obvious it's so that we would learn to praise the glory of his grace down again at verse 5 God destined us in love to be his sons and daughters through Jesus

Christ according to the the word is good pleasure it's not just purpose it's good pleasure happy pleasure of his will to the praise of his glorious grace which he has freely graced on us in the

beloved there's nothing cold and mathematical about this there is a delight and a joy in God God loves to do this it is the passion of his heart it's God who's active it's God who takes the initiative and he enjoys to lavish his riches on us and it's because he chose to take delight in us that we begin to take delight in him he loves us and this morning as we saw George baptized we see a sign a sure sign and seal of his electing grace this is very helpful for us we live in a city where by osmosis we keep getting the feeling that we might miss out on something and along comes the gospel and says to us

God chose you before the world for the praise of his glorious grace for the delight of his own delight that's why election is the first and primary blessing and I I don't think we can really understand what grace is unless you understand that God chose you before the foundation of the world then salvation and then only is salvation completely pure grace because of the good pleasure of his will if you do away with that or if you're embarrassed about it you just block the praise of God but if you want to unblock the praise of God here is the key here is the key that he chose us in him for his own glory and grace so we take these things and we meditate we say thank you to God and we bless God the father of our Lord Jesus Christ because he has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing amen let's pray