

We are Blessed

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, friends. It's 2026. The first month of 2026 is gone already. We're into! Month two, how fast it goes. And this year marks 125 years since this church here, St. Paul's! Chastwood was started. And so this term, as Nick has said, we are launching our vision for the next five to 10 years of what our life and ministry will be together in this place. And as we get into those details of those plans and what we're hoping to do under God, it's crucial that we understand that it is built on a foundation of who we are. Who is the church? It's not often the way that we think about church, though, is it? Who is the church? We normally think of it in terms of an institution or things like a denomination or a building. The church is a building.

Or people say it's a lovely church, which they're referring to the building. Or it's the place, it's a destination. I'm going to church this morning. When we think of the church, we think of plans, we think of methodologies, we think of vision, we think of structures, we think of programs, we think of budgets, we think of all those things. And they all have a place. But first and foremost, we must understand who the church is. Not what the church is, but who the church is.

You see, the Bible overflows with powerful imagery of God's affection and his love for his church. Imagery of the family, the body of Christ. And the one that we often maybe don't talk about is the church being the bride of Christ. That is, the church reflects God's eternal beauty and glory. And I wish I could unpack this one in just a sermon by itself. But the great English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, called the church the dearest place on earth.

[2 : 30] Not often the way we think of the church, the dearest place on earth. And so what we have in the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, the Ephesians here, which is what we're going to be working through this term, is the grand vision of the church's cosmic role as the body of Christ, Christ as the bride of Christ in God's eternal plans. That's what we have in the book Ephesians. You won't find anywhere else in the Bible so clear about the vision that God has for his church, the bride of his son, Jesus. The Ephesians reveals the position and the job description of the church in effecting God's grand plan for all time and eternity. In fact, the church is central to God's plans.

The 18th century American pastor and theologian, Jonathan Edwards, emphasized this point in a sermon where he said that so centralism. He said, God created the entire universe for one main end.

And that end was to obtain a spouse for his beloved son. And so as you read through the Bible, what you see reflected again and again is the language of God's love and affection for his church. When he looks at his church, he doesn't look at the things that we look for, the programs, the timing, the people, the buildings, the air conditioners, whether they're working or not, which one of them isn't working this morning. He doesn't look at that.

He sees the beauty of his bride for his son, beautified by the blood of his son.

[5 : 05] And he longs for the day, as Revelation tells us, where the buyer is beautifully prepared and ready for the marriage feast.

That's his church. And so as we look ahead for our plans for our next phase of life and ministry together, my prayer is that our affections would be awakened for his church and why we exist. And that that would transform our lives. To quote Spurgeon again, nothing in the world is dearer to God's heart than his church.

Therefore, being his, let us belong to it, that by our prayers, our gifts, and our labours, we may support and strengthen it.

May that be the outcome. So the first thing I want us to see this morning is that who we are, we are blessed. And I've got three points, which you can get on the St. Paul's app as we go through.

[6 : 24] So first of all, God has a plan. Now, no English translation of the New Testament is able to capture fully Ephesians 3 to 14.

Because in the original language, the Greek language, that is one sentence. Verses 3 to 14 is one sentence.

202 words in one sentence. And to get to the meaning of a sentence, as you would know, I had to Google this, but you probably don't need to Google this.

But to get to the meaning of a sentence, you need really to find two things. You need to find the subject of a sentence, and you need to find the predicate of a sentence.

And then you capture the what is the sentence about. The subject and the predicate. So for those of you in basic English, you might want to write that bit down.

[7 : 24] So the subject tells us who or the what the sentence is about. And the predicate tells us what the subject does.

And in this very long sentence, it's very clear the subject is God. And the predicate in the English language is a little bit harder to spot.

Because there's a number of little, you know, predicates in this sentence, in the English language. God is doing many things in this. But in the original language, in the Greek, the predicate is very clear.

And it's in verses 9 to 11. And it is very simply, particularly verses 8 and 9. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ.

And verse 10. Everything in history is in his plan. To be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment. And Jesus is the point of the plan.

[8 : 39] The second half of verse 10. To bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. Subject is God.

And the predicate is what God is doing through all of history is to bring everything unified under Christ. That is what God is doing through all of history.

And his church is central to that plan. Which means, having read that from Ephesians, Bertrand Russell was wrong. Bertrand Russell's view, which is basically the secular view of our time, is that there is no plan for time and space.

In his book, *The Free Man's Worship*, he wrote, Man, humanity, is the product of causes which have no prevision of the end that they were achieving.

That is, that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocation of atoms.

[9 : 50] That no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave. In other words, Russell was absolutely convinced, as our secular age is, that everything is an accident.

There's no plan, there's no creator, there's no purpose, there's no meaning. And he goes on to say, Therefore, there's no heroism, no sacrifice, no human achievement, no human advancement at all, will ultimately make any difference in the long run.

It might in the short term, but in the long run, it'll make absolutely no difference whatsoever. And so Russell concluded that the best way to live life, to embrace life, the only safe way to live life, is to embrace despair.

Now, to be honest with you, Bertrand Russell was more courageous than the average secular person.

Ephesians here says, There is a plan. Verse 11, And absolutely everything in history is in that plan.

[11 : 26] Everything is in that plan. And because that raised a big question for us. Is everything therefore determined or do humans have free will?

You know, that's a question that's been in history since, well, as far back as you can record in history. Are we free or is there a plan that we can't escape in any kind of way?

And the Bible's answer to that question is very simple. Yes. Yes. That's because the Bible is way more nuanced than any philosophy in life.

You see, one view says that everything is absolutely fixed, our choices don't matter, and whatever you choose in life is ultimately going to be overridden by the fixed plan.

And what that does, if it's just that, what that does is it entirely saps a person of any hope at all. The other view says that your future, which is more common nowadays, that your future is whatever you

make it.

[12:45] All of your choices determine your destiny, so make sure that you make the right choices in life. And if that's the case, if absolutely everything in your life is determined by the choices you make, the best choice you can make is don't get out of bed in the morning.

Much safer. You can see because that view of history just loads people up with fear. And you can see it worked out in the younger generation nowadays, sucked into a culture of expressive individualism, and you make all the right choices, you be who you are.

The Bible says that both of those views are wrong and right.

The Bible says our choices matter, and God will hold us accountable to them. But ultimately, God is in charge, and his plan will advance, and his plan is to bless.

It means that we can be absolutely alert, and at peace at the same time.

[14:09] It means that. God is sovereign, and we get to choose. Think about this.

How many of your decisions, for you older people, how many of your decisions in your 20s that you desperately felt you needed in order to live life, that never came to fruition, that you look back now and go, geez, I'm glad that never happened?

When I was in my mid-20s, I was desperately trying to get a young lady to marry me, praying God would sovereignly overrule, blah, blah, blah.

And it never happened. And instead, this week, Nat and I celebrate 27 years of marriage.

Yeah, I mean, that's goodwill there. So, you know, like, after 27 years, I'm glad that my plans never came to fruition.

[15:15] Back in those days. Ephesians 1 tells us that God has a plan for all things.

Jesus is the center of God's plan, and it's a plan to bless. Verses 1 to 3 is the summary verse of this chapter, and it's an astonishing claim.

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.

Has blessed us. It's already happened. With every spiritual blessing, which is absolute language.

Nothing is lacking here. Nothing is overlooked. Nothing is held back from God. I sign off my emails on most cases with, you know, with things like, you know, regards, kind regards.

[16:17] But most often, I think, particularly when I'm communicating to Christians, excuse me, with Christians, I often use blessings, or many blessings from Steve.

You know, it means, in our culture, to wish someone well. But that's not what it means here. God's not wishing us well.

In the New Testament, the word blessed is closer to the Hebrew word shalom. It means to have every joy and benefit of your heart and soul and every longing for your being fulfilled.

That's what the word blessed means here. A Christian is someone who has already been blessed. How's that possible? Well, the key to it is right at the end of verse 3, in Christ. Verse 4, God chose us in him. Verse 5, we are adopted through Christ Jesus.

[17:32] Verse 6, in the one he loves. Verse 7, in him we have redemption. Verse 9, God purposed those things in Christ. Verse 11, in him we were chosen.

You see, to become a Christian is not simply to get Jesus as your Lord to obey, although he is that, or a model to follow in life, although he is that, or as a saviour to be grateful for, although you should do that.

A Christian is someone who has been put in Christ, the theological language of it, you have union with Christ.

It's a marriage union. In such a way that everything that belongs to Christ is now yours.

You are united to Jesus Christ, and we are united to Jesus legally. Imagine the scenario of a very poor person marrying an extremely wealthy person without any prenuptial agreements.

[18:50] In that moment, when you are legally married, everything that is owned by the wealthy person is shared with you legally.

You share it legally. You have a right to it through legal union. And so what it says here, everything that belongs to Jesus, every single thing that he has accomplished belongs to the Christian.

but we're also united to him vitally. The Holy Spirit comes into the life of the Christian and the life of the church, and it brings character change.

The Spirit brings character change into the likeness! of the bridegroom. So the bride reflects the bridegroom until eventually on the final day at the wedding feast, we are glorified.

we will be who we are now in every sense, perfected, flawless, sin-free, suffering-free, existence forever on that final day.

[20 : 08] A Christian is in Christ with all his benefits, even though it may take a lifetime to work those benefits out into our lives until we are finally glorified.

All Christians, all Christians have every spiritual blessing in Christ. They're not two categories of Christian, the more spiritual and the less spiritual.

Either you are a Christian or you're not a Christian. and every Christian has every spiritual blessing. If you're not a Christian, you have no spiritual blessings and all those blessings come from union with Christ, connected to Christ.

Now, there's an interesting incident that happened during the Paris Peace Conference at the end of World War I. It went from 1919 to 1920 as they divided up the world, basically.

The delegates which came from Arabia were astonished when they were staying in the hotel rooms in Paris.

[21 : 27] They were astonished by the instant and endless supply of water that came from these taps in the hotel rooms. They'd never experienced anything like that in the desert of Arabia.

And so, as they prepared to leave the peace conference, some members of the delegation from Arabia were found trying to remove the taps from their hotel rooms to take them back and attach them to their tents in Arabia.

and they thought that the magic of instant and endless water came from these taps. And T.E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, for those who don't know, he was acting as advisor and translator for the delegation.

He had to explain to them that the taps themselves have no, there's no water that comes instantly from the taps. They are connected through pipes and reservoirs in order to get to the water.

And friends, we have no spiritual blessing unless we are connected to Jesus by faith. United to Christ, union with Christ, in Christ, is who the Christian is.

[22 : 53] And every spiritual blessing flows from that and continues to flow from that. The word every means it would in fact to be impossible to list all of those blessings.

Although Paul does mention some in this sentence, even this list is overwhelming in its implications. Verse 5, verse 7, verse 8, adopted, forgiveness, lavish with wisdom and understanding, the mystery of the Holy Spirit, guaranteed, every one of those blessings is staggering, staggering enough in its richness by itself.

And they have many arms to them, each one. For instance, verse 5, let me just have a couple here, adoption to sonship.

In Jesus Christ, God becomes our father as we are included into his family. family. And one implication of that fatherhood is that we have access to him as his much-loved children.

There's one very famous photo of John F. Kennedy when he was president of the United States.

His young son, John Junior, was playing under his desk, the resolute desk, in the Oval Office while he was meeting with officials in the Oval Office.

[24 : 22] I'm not allowed to do that with Donald Trump. Not that necessarily I want to, but no one's allowed to do that.

Of course, Donald Trump went and redid that photo with his grandson under the desk, just so that he can go down to history as well. But if I just decide to do that, I'd be stopped.

If I ran towards the president, I'd be shut if the Secret Service is working. As a child of God, we have access to God without appointments, free access to the creator of the universe, and we can boldly run into his arms.

He is our father. Adoption also means inheritance, which is why here in this verse, it's why the emphasis is specific that we are being adopted as sons of God.

Not sons and daughters, sons. You know, Paul, a bit more inclusive language. The word sons is inclusive language. In the culture that Paul is writing into here, only sons could be heirs and inherit the estate of the father.

[25 : 53] And what it's saying here is that as adopted, all people, male, female, know who you are, whatever culture you are, as you adopted into the family, as you inherit the family, you are co-heirs of the future with Christ.

Whoever you are, co-heirs. We don't know completely what that means, but Jesus says the meek will inherit the earth. Adoption also means security.

If you're an employee, how long does an employer put up with your bad behaviour and your failures? Everyone has their limit, I suppose. But how long does a parent put up with the waywardness of a child?

Kind of forever in one way or another. Carried in their heart all of their life. God is our father and we are secure in his love.

That's adoption to sons and you could just unpack that more and more. But the pride of place here is redemption. In verse seven we are told, in him we have redemption.

[27 : 03] Now redemption is a loaded word. It's interchangeable with the word ransom, which is a little bit more than paying a debt.

Redemption is a little bit more than paying a debt. For instance, in New South Wales, there are certain violations that you could do which would mean that your car would be impounded. Certain violations. Your car would be towed and locked away and it would be locked away until you paid the fines. And when you pay the fine, whatever is owed, when you pay the fine, your car gets released from captivity.

It's not just paying a debt, it's paying the debt so that you might be released from captivity. You liberate it. Now, Indian lawyer and activist Mahatma Gandhi said that, quite interestingly, and I would agree with him on this, that both Eastern and Western religions agree that every human being is not free.

All humanity is enslaved. And Gandhi said, we are slaves to selfishness and the ego, which is a great description of what the Bible calls sin.

[28 : 40] We are always grasping at things because our egos are so needy. We're grasping at power and money and beauty and status and popularity and recognition because our egos are so needy.

And Gandhi went on to say that Christianity helps because in Jesus, and Gandhi was not a Christian at all, Christianity helps because he says, in Jesus, we have a way to be free from the selfishness and egocentricity that enslaves us purely by the example of Jesus.

And so for him, the Sermon of the Mount was the pinnacle of Christian teaching. And so for him, Jesus was the ultimate example of nonviolence to which he modelled his life on.

He's the ultimate example of giving up a power and wealth and influence and the ultimate example of sacrificial service of others. And he suggested that when we see Jesus forgiving, loving, serving, dying for others, it will move us and liberate us from our selfishness and our ego.

Now, with all due respect to Gandhi for his accomplishments in life and I respect them, he missed Christianity.

[30 : 13] He missed the point of it all. You see, seeing the amazing life of Jesus and trying to live up to that, it will crush you, make you feel worse than you already feel about yourself.

Trying to be him would end up crushing us under the weight of expectations that we can never meet. We would be cursed, not blessed.

We don't need someone to live up to, we need someone to liberate us, to redeem us, to set us free. and that is at the centre of God's plan to bless. And the key that unlocks every spiritual blessing is verse seven.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins. You see, if I see Jesus Christ loving, forgiving, serving, dying, not for others, but for me, doing all of that in my place, that's entirely different.

[31 : 36] Jesus Christ, God the Son, came to earth and took on human flesh. He sided with us so that he could represent us to God.

not only took on our identity, he took on our sin. He died on a Roman cross to pay the debt that we owe to God for our egocentricity.

The debt that keeps us enslaved to ourselves, captive to ourselves. And in paying that debt he has set us free, he's redeemed us, he has ransomed us back into relationship with God, part of his bride for his son, his church, his plan.

The limitless God became limited to human flesh, nailed fast to a Roman cross, enclosed in a tomb to set us free.

to pay our debt he was cursed so that we might be blessed.

[32 : 54] And why would he bother to do that? Why? Because we were the best option as a bride for his son when he looked at all of humanity?

No. Verse 4, in love he predestines us. Verse 7, we have redemption in accordance with the riches of his grace. Verse 9, he may know to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure. All because of his love, his grace, his pleasure. which brings me to us and where we are and as we think about our future together.

Receiving every spiritual blessing in God's grace to us in the Lord Jesus has a profound impact on your life. You spend the rest of your life realizing this blessing by working it into your heart until it shapes who you are by conforming you to the image of the bridegroom.

And these verses give us one important way that it changes us. One important way. We're going to see more changes as we go through the rest of Ephesians. But verse 6, to the praise of his glorious grace.

[34 : 27] Verse 12, for the praise of his glory. Verse 14, for the praise of his glory. When you have every spiritual blessing through Jesus in Christ, you don't just assent to believe that in your mind.

It becomes glorious to you. It becomes praiseworthy to you. In other words, you move from praising and seeking the glory of self and your egocentricity, working for that, and you turn beyond yourself to praise his glorious grace.

God in other words, what it means is as God looks at his church, the bride for his son, and says, it is beautiful to me, you look to God and his son and you say, he is beautiful to me.

He has captured my heart. He captures my imagination. You praise his grace, you lift your voice and you sing.

You see, this is not just evidence of having received every spiritual blessing, but it's also the way that every spiritual blessing works its way into your life.

[36 : 06] Praising the glory of his grace in every aspect of life. Is there nothing more beautiful?

Is there nothing more captivating for the human heart? Nothing more glorious? Nothing more powerful? Nothing more moving?

than someone giving their life for others. It's in whatever culture you come from, that is the most powerful narrative of life.

We're amazed by the acts of those who intervened at grace risk to their own life to save others in the recent Bondi massacre. I'm amazed by those who jumped in the water, bloody water to rescue a shark, attack victim.

Amazed by those people who do those things. And what Jesus done for us to bless us, it was not a rush of adrenaline.

[37 : 23] It wasn't a thoughtless act. It was planned before the creation of the world. There is no more powerful narrative structure, there is no more powerful moral beauty than sacrificial love.

Especially a patient plan flowing from the heart of God in what Jesus done for us before he even created anything.

Jesus did all of it to secure us for the eternal blessing, glory, and love that is his, that we might share in it.

And those blessings change the driving center of your life. It will move you so that the things you used to find captivating no longer drive you, no longer captivate you.

His glorious grace will captivate you, capture you, it will lift your heart to praise. And you will start to see that his plan to work all things through his church is beautiful.

[38 : 41] And you'll start to see his church, his bride, in a different way. It will become beautiful to you in such a way that you'll give yourself to it.

Now one gift the Lord Jesus has given to his body, his bride, his church, was what we call the Lord's Supper.

And in the Lord's Supper, what it does is it reminds us of the cross of Christ as the place of deliverance for us, the place of redemption for our sin, our death, and from hell.

It reminds us of God's loving plan for us. I'm going to invite those who are serving to distribute that now as I continue.

You see, when Jesus celebrated his last supper with his disciples, what they were celebrating was the Passover, which God had instituted in the Old Testament for his people to continue celebrating.

[39 : 48] and the Passover meal was about temporal redemption, temporal deliverance from captivity.

The Lord's Supper in Jesus points to eternal deliverance. The Passover lamb had to be slaughtered every year.

The Lord's Supper points us to the Lord Jesus who died a sufficient death for all people for all time to set us free. And so what the Lord's Supper does is it radiates with the glory of Christ in his flesh and his blood.

And what it does is it causes us, his bride, to reflect back to when our sins were atoned for by our bridegroom, God's spotless lamb, while also looking forward, causing us to look forward to the great marriage supper of the lamb when we shall bask together in the resplendent glory of the Father. And these simple elements of these wafers and the juice that we're having this morning, as we participate in this and as we remember Christ, they become a beautifying influence on us as it demonstrates the importance of our remembering, the importance of our loving, and the importance of our examining.

[41 : 37] The Apostle Paul repeated the words of Jesus when he instructed the Corinthian church in the Lord's Supper, do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me. In other words, the supper becomes a path to congregational beauty as we come together and remember our bridegroom.

people. And he reminds the Corinthians again, because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake in the one bread.

What the early church did, which we've sort of shut down since COVID unfortunately, but what the early church did was they passed around one loaf of bread amongst the church, and each would pinch off a small piece of bread to celebrate the Lord's supper.

And through that physical representation, the Apostle Paul was reminding you, you are one body, and your body is connected to the bread of life, Jesus, your bridegroom.

And for this type of mutual love and reconciliation to be present in the life of the church, that's what we're doing as we participate in Christ. And also, it's also calling us to examine ourselves.

[43 : 06] When he said to the church of Corinth, whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unmerthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.

So let's just spend a moment to examine our hearts. And I wonder whether the quote of Spurgeon might be helpful here once again.

Nothing in the world is dearer to God's heart than his church. Therefore, being his, let us belong to it, that by our prayers, our gifts, and our labours, we may support and strengthen it.

Is God's plan in his church beautiful to you? And is that reflected in your life?

Is his church beautiful? Thank you.