

The Amazing Blessings of God

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[0 : 00] So we're starting this book, Ephesians, as a church. We actually started it last week, and it's all about the church. That's what the book is about. And I can't think of a more important book of the Bible for us to look at just now at St Silas.

We had a vacancy before I arrived in January to be the new minister here. Some of you might be thinking you've been serving very hard at St Silas, you continue to do that, but you're feeling tired of that.

Others of you might be conscious that you feel that over time you've drifted from church involvement, maybe that you could look back at a season in your life when you were more involved in church, and you're perhaps less involved now.

Whatever you're thinking about you and your church, Ephesians is so important, because God tells us what the church is and what it's for. So let's pray and ask for God's help as we look at this together.

Heavenly Father. Heavenly Father. Heavenly Father. So that you can understand your word. And hearts that are willing to change. And follow you.

[1 : 07] In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I don't know what really excites you, but I'd love you to think about that. Sometimes it's hard to tell what really excites someone, because we express excitement in different ways, don't we?

And it's been this great summer again for Andy Murray. Last year he won Sports Personality of the Year by a huge majority of the votes from the public.

Thoroughly deserved, of course. But it was mentioned that Andy Murray had won an award that was about having a personality, and he's not the most charismatic person to win that award.

And to be fair to Andy Murray, he saw that really well. So I don't know whether you saw his acceptance speech, but brilliantly he said this. No matter how excited I try to sound, my voice always sounds boring.

That's just my voice. I'm sorry. I'm very excited right now. Thank you very much, everyone. So he's self-aware. Some people hold their excitement internally.

[2 : 09] Other people visibly go nuts when they're excited, don't they? But what actually makes you excited? Is it your team winning? Is it your own personal success at something?

A good workout at the gym? Being busy at work? Listening to some great music? Perhaps being at a concert of live music? Is it food?

The smell of a good curry coming to your table in a restaurant? Whatever it is, just picture yourself in that moment of real excitement. I guess the question is, do we feel that excited about what God has done for us?

You see, Paul writes these letters, the Apostle Paul that we've got in the Bible. And if you look down again at Ephesians 1, he tends to start his letters in the same way. He starts letters by saying who it's from, Paul.

And then he says who it's to. And then he tends to say thank you for them. So if you just turn on from Ephesians, a few pages to Philippians, page 1178, you'll see the normal pattern.

[3 : 25] Paul and Timothy this time in Philippians 1, that's who it's from. Then who it's to, all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi. And then in verse 3, I thank my God every time I remember you.

And he says why he thanks God for them. Go on again to the next one, Colossians, page 1182.

Who is it from? It's from Paul and Timothy again. Who is it to?

Verse 2, the Christians in Colossae. Verse 3, we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you. He gives thanks, doesn't he? We go on a couple of pages to 1

Thessalonians, page 1186.

This time Silas is in there. Good old Silas. Paul, Silas and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians. Verse 2, we always thank God for all of you.

See the pattern? Let's go back to Ephesians again. Page 1173. It tells you it's from, from Paul. To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.

[4 : 26] Where do the thanks come? Just have a look down and see where he thanks God for them. I've just heard it from someone. People see it?

Verse 15. Do you see that? Verse 15. And in between, you've got verses 3 to 14. In the original Greek, it's one sentence. It's 202 words.

One sentence. It's as though Paul can't wait to get on with telling us the most exciting thing we could ever hear. And what we'll see as the letter goes on is that this news isn't just there to excite us.

It's there to transform us. We started looking at it last week. And we were particularly thinking last week about the awesome God who gives these blessings. So we heard that God, who does everything for his own glory and does whatever he pleases, has acted in history to exalt Jesus Christ by choosing some people and blessing them in Jesus.

That's what we saw last week. And this week, we're going to think about those blessings that are there for Christians. And the summary comes in verse 3. Just have a look there.

[5 : 40] Verse 3. 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, the heavenly realms are just as real as the world around us, so we can see the earthly realms.

The heavenly realms are where God is. They're where the risen Jesus is. And that's where we have these blessings. And did you see it was in the past tense? God has blessed us there already, if we're Christians.

And it's so emphatic. It's exhaustive. Every spiritual blessing for the Christian has already been given to you in Christ. And the Bible word blessing doesn't mean what we mean by bless you today, which tends to be, I wish you well.

It's a much stronger word than that. Blessing is hugely significant in the Bible. It means that you're happy because you are approved of by God.

And he has given you every joy and benefit that your heart needs and longs for. And Paul goes on in the rest of this sentence, these verses, to describe some of those blessings for us.

[6 : 49] So we're going to answer three questions this morning. What do we get? If we're a Christian, what do we get? How do we get it? And thirdly, who makes up the difference? So first of all, what do we get?

The first thing we get is that we've been chosen by the Father for adoption. The choosing comes in verses 4 and 5. And first, he describes how God will see us in the future.

So verse 4. For he chose us in him, before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in his sight. But this isn't just a court verdict on us.

It's a new family that we join as God brings us in to that group of people. Verse 5. In love, he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will.

So if you're a Christian here this morning, this was God's plan for your life before he'd even made the mountains. That you would be holy, that you would be set apart for him. That's what holiness is.

[7 : 50] You'd be set apart, you'd be known as his. That you'd be blameless. That all the things that you've ever done wrong and that you'll ever do wrong will not be looked at by God. He'll see you as blameless.

And that you'd be adopted to sonship. Being chosen is immensely comforting. Because when you become a Christian, you think that you've reached out and you've got hold of God's hand like this. And you're holding on to God's hand to have a relationship with him. And then God tells you, I chose you. So he's got hold of your hand like this. And if God's got hold of you, he won't let go. We have to keep believing in the Lord Jesus. We have to keep going on as a Christian. But God keeps his chosen people believing.

And we should hear that as a great comfort to us. And we were chosen for adoption. Adoption means we have an inheritance. The language is used there of sonship.

[8 : 57] And it's not because Paul's sexist. It's because at that time, to be an heir to inherit, you would have had to be the boy. But whether you're a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, if you put your trust in Jesus Christ, you are an heir with God in God's family.

And adoption affects our relationship with God right now. It means we have access to God. Access to God as our father. I don't know whether you've ever seen the picture of John F. Kennedy in the Oval Office with his son sitting under the desk.

People all over the world, powerful people, desperate to get an audience with the President of America. His little boy can play in the Oval Office because it's his dad.

He has access to him. And so it is for us with our Heavenly Father. And adoption makes our relationship with God completely secure. Just think, if God saved us to be in a kind of employee-employer relationship, how different that would be.

How long would it take before he'd say to us, this hasn't really worked out? I've been a bit disappointed with your performance. I'm going to ask somebody else.

[10 : 08] Well, no, of course not. When you're a parent, your son or your daughter can mess up as badly and as often as they like. They're still your child. That will never change.

This has been described as the highest privilege of the Christian faith. Jim Packer, the writer, says this. The thought of our maker, becoming our perfect parent, faithful in love and care, generous and thoughtful, interested in all we do, respecting our individuality, skillful in training us, wise in guidance, always available, helping us to find ourselves in maturity, integrity and uprightness, is a thought which can have meaning for everybody.

Whether we come to it by saying, I had a wonderful father and I see that God is like that, only more so, or by saying, my father disappointed me, here and here and here, but God, praise his name, will be very different.

Or even by saying, I have never known what it is to have a father on earth, but thank God, I now have one in heaven. Friends, can you imagine what it will be like to meet God one day and know that his plan to adopt you was made in eternity, so that he says to you, I don't know what he'll say, but he might say, I'm so glad to see you face to face at last.

You know, I have loved you for such a long time. As I planned the whole course of world history, as I oversaw the thoughts and decisions of every human being and global power, I thought about where you would be born.

[11 : 49] I thought about what you would be like. I walked with you through your greatest moments and your darkest days, and now you'll spend forever with me in my garden, where there's no more grief and no more worry, and instead there is joy beyond what you've ever experienced before.

The second blessing Paul is so excited about here is that we've been redeemed by the Son for a purpose.

Verse 7 is so expressive, isn't it? Just have a look at verse 7. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us.

Now that word redemption is the language of the slave market, of people being in need of having their freedom bought for them. And we fear for people who are enslaved, don't we?

The Chibot girls in Nigeria, people who were trafficked into the UK, we fear for them. And remarkably, the Bible says that life away from God is a form of slavery.

[12 : 56] We might not feel like we're slaves, you might not feel like that if you're not a Christian, but the Bible explains that we're trapped away from God. And that is because we all choose something to serve, something that we'll build our life on, that we think will make us truly happy.

So if we're not following God and trusting him for that, we turn good things into God things. And we love and serve and trust them and obey them, thinking they'll give us what only God can truly give us.

If only I had a bit more of that, I'd be truly happy. And because we're serving other things, we can't get back to God. We're trapped away from him.

And the Bible warns us that if we remain like that, we will stay like that, forever, away from God.

And that for the Christian, in verse 7, God has completely changed that.

We're free from the penalty of sin, nothing to feel guilty about anymore, no shame anymore. We're free from the power of sin. We don't have to sin anymore.

[14:03] If you're a Christian, you don't have to sin anymore. And God's done that with a life-changing purpose in mind. It was in verses 9 and 10. He made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment, to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

So God is liberating people to bring them into this new community. That's the church here, this morning, and all over the world today, as God's gathering people from every nation into this new community under Christ, that exalts Christ.

And that's why, for any church, for our church, unity is really important, and it has to be unity around Jesus Christ, because it gives a picture of the future that God is bringing for our whole world.

So that's the future hope that God has in mind, and it's that that he turns to next with our third blessing. So we've been sealed by the Spirit for a great future.

If we just pick things up halfway through verse 13, well, I'll read from the beginning of verse 13, and you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.

[15:22] When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession to the praise of his glory.

So Paul describes the Spirit here as like God's down payment. God knows what he wants. He knows what he would treasure more than anything else that he has made, and so he's made a deposit, and that's because one day he will take possession of us, his treasured possession.

So by giving the Spirit to his people, it's as though God has marked us as his in the way that we might have valuables at home, and we might use an ultraviolet marker to mark them, so that if they ever got stolen, they could be identified by the police.

Well, we have been branded, we've been marked as Christians in a way that's not obviously visible to the world, although it should be as we grow by the power of the Spirit more like Christ, but certainly it's visible in heaven from the day we become a Christian, so that God the Father can look down and say, they're mine, those people, and one day I'll take possession of them.

Now from our perspective, that means that the gift of the Spirit today means that we can enjoy our relationship with God now. It's there to be experienced today and enjoyed.

[16:45] He's the appetizer, and yet through him also we are reminded and affirmed in believing that the best is still to come.

He guarantees our inheritance for the future when that relationship will be perfected. So the Christian life is marked by a future hope that we're looking forward to that's so certain it breaks into the present and shapes how we live now.

God promises that there's this day coming when he gets his inheritance that's going to be so immense and so epic and so awesome and so wonderful that it's going to wipe the world clean.

God will transform us so that we're fit for that title of being his treasured possession. The writer John Newton says, the Christian hope is so glorious it makes the best times of your life leaveable and the worst times of your life bearable.

The writer Tim Keller says we're waiting as Christians for the ultimate cock crow, the ultimate dawn, the ultimate spring. And it's worth saying that if you're counting the cost today, what it's costing you today to be a Christian, you've got to look at that future hope because promises like that are worth leaving everything for today.

[18:07] So that's what we get. Those are the three blessings Paul focuses on. What do we get? Our second question to answer this morning more briefly, how do we get it? Paul makes the same point again and again in these verses.

Just have a look at verse 3. God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. In verse 4, he chose us in him.

Verse 5, our adoption is through Jesus Christ. Verse 6, he's freely given us in the one he loves.

Verse 7, in him we have redemption. Verse 9, he purposed his will in Christ.

Verse 11, in him we were also chosen. Verse 13, and you also were included in Christ. The Christian life is this call to be part of a completely new relationship, a new union, a new identity for us.

See, Jesus isn't just a rescuer, though he is that, and he's not just a great example, though certainly he is. He's also, as Christians, we're in him. And that means that whatever happens to him happens to us.

[19 : 15] He died on the cross, punished for sins, and so God treats us as though we've paid the penalty already for our sins. He rose again and is ascended into heaven, exalted, and so God treats us as though we are heirs to the inheritance that Jesus will have as well.

When God looks at us, he sees Jesus. And there's an important point here as well, just to think about, that there aren't different shades of being a Christian.

Being a Christian isn't a process. I often find this with teenagers. If I'm talking to a teenager, perhaps on a holiday, Christian holidays, and you're explaining the Christian faith, and sometimes you use this model called two ways to live, and you get to the end of it and there's this picture, and you say, so you can see there's two ways to live.

You can either continue to live for yourself and be the king of your own life, or you can accept what Jesus has done for you and respond to that by turning back to God through him and being a Christian, living for him from now on.

Then I'll say, which way do you think you have decided to live? And almost always, the response will be, I think I might be somewhere in between.

[20 : 29] Or people might say, I'm not a very good Christian. Or we talk, don't we often, sometimes very helpfully, but we talk about the language of a journey of faith.

Now, though that could be helpful to describe someone's feeling, their experience, we have to realise that on a deep level it's not actually true. You're either a Christian or you're not a Christian because Christians are in Christ.

So you're either in that relationship or you're not in that relationship or you're not a Christian. And if you're in Christ, it's not anything to do with your behaviour so that if you've behaved badly you might think, oh I might be somewhere in the middle.

Now all the benefits come entirely as God's gift to us. So I don't know whether you noticed that in verses 3-10 but we did nothing in verses 3-10. We just heard God blessed you, he chose you, he adopted you, he predestined you, he's freely given you his grace, he's lavished it on you, you haven't done anything yet.

And it's only when we get to verse 13 that we find out what we have to do to get all that. Verse 13, you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.

[21 : 46] When you believed you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. You hear the message and it's the message of truth. Do you see that?

I find it hard to imagine my blessings in the heavenly realms. We might find it hard to believe they're really there. I find it hard to think about my future hope. We might find it hard to believe that's really going to happen.

But the Christian hope is certain because it's based on what's already happened in history. That Jesus of Nazareth lived the life we should have lived.

He died the death we should have died. He rose again from the dead. It's historically verifiable that we have a future hope that is certain. And so as soon as you believe that truth from the past all of these blessings become yours.

If you're here and you're not a Christian I want to urge you with everything I've got to consider this offer from Jesus of all these blessings for trusting him.

[22 : 52] So we've seen what we get. We've heard how we get it. Our third question this morning who makes up the difference? See what we bring into this relationship is sin, slavery, unholiness, blameworthiness.

We come out of it with redemption, forgiveness, adoption, the hope of glory and somebody has to pay the cost for that. And that's what Jesus Christ has done.

For the Christian, for the church, it's like a destitute woman who lives on the streets with debts that she could never repay. And she is looked on and loved by a wealthy prince who marries her.

And the moment he does, all of her debts are wiped clean away by the riches that he brings into that union. How does Jesus do that for us? Well, Paul gave us the answer in verse 7.

In him, in Christ, we have redemption through his blood. It's the most powerful, heart-changing narrative in any story. Stories all over the world today told of a man or woman laying down their life for another.

[24 : 01] And that's because we were made for this story. In 1982, 13th of January 1982, seven inches of snow fell in Washington, D.C. Air Florida Flight 90 took off from National Airport's runway with 83 passengers on board.

But the ice on its wings stopped it getting high enough and it crashed into a bridge and it plunged nose first into the frozen Potomac River. Now, by the time the rescue services arrived at Air Florida Flight 90, they could only still see the tail still visible and the survivors were disappearing amidst these chunks of ice and debris from the plane.

A rescue helicopter saw a man. There were television crews there, millions of people watching live and the helicopter let down its rope to the man and millions of people watched as he grabbed the rope and he deliberately handed it to somebody else.

Again, he did the same thing. Once they pulled that person to shore, they handed the rope to the same man, he gave it to somebody else. He did that five times. He's sometimes known as the sixth passenger.

Five times he passed the rope to others, they went back the sixth time and he'd gone. People all over the world were inspired by what he'd done for those people. Arland Williams, as he's called, saved five passengers by giving his life for them.

[25 : 22] So inspiring to watch and it's not even about us. In the gospel story of what Jesus Christ has done, that is wonderfully true of you.

That Jesus saw you in your perilous plight and knew the only way to get you out of that was to die in your place, bearing the weight of your sin so that you could go free and have all the blessings that we've seen in this passage.

Now the Apostle Paul has begun a letter here that's very practical. But before he tells us that we have to be sexually pure, that we have to be kind to each other, that we have to commit to our church family, that we have to be willing to speak the truth in love to each other for each other's good, he wants us first to dwell in what Jesus has done for us.

Why? Well it's because this is the way that God will transform our hearts. I don't know whether you remember how the Jason Bourne films began, but Jason Bourne was this guy who had incredible skill and training and once he found his safety deposit box you realise he had quite a bit of cash as well, and he wakes up one day on a fishing boat and he has no idea who he is.

So he's not living out who he is because his memory is gone. And I wonder if sometimes we as Christians we live a bit like Jason Bourne at the beginning of the films, that we walk around looking just like everybody else does.

[26 : 50] We get anxious about the same things everyone else gets anxious about. We fear what other people fear. When people get in our way we get angry with them and we get frustrated and resentful.

We get greedy, we get discontent with our lives. And all of that is because we've forgotten who we are and what we have. So Paul says, don't focus on the earthly day to day.

Lift up your gaze to the heavenly reality. Every spiritual blessing in Christ. Let that be what you are excited about and what drives your behaviour.

Then you'll be ready to listen to what God has to say about being loving and kind and being the people that God saved you to be. Amen.

I thought it would be helpful. There's some big stuff in that passage. I thought it might be helpful to give just a couple of minutes to talk about it. So inside the notice sheets underneath the talk outline there are just two questions.

[27 : 56] first one, in Christ you've been adopted by God the Father, redeemed by the Son, sealed by the Spirit. Why not take one of those and just share with the person next to you something of what that means to you.

Second question, if I had a deeper grasp of the spiritual blessings God has blessed me with in Christ, how would that help me to be more loving? Let's take a couple of minutes.

Just turn to the person next to you. If you're too embarrassed to do this, you don't have to do it. But why not discuss these questions together and then I'll pray. And loving Heavenly Father, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we praise you for your salvation plan that according to your good pleasure that you have purposed in Christ, you are bringing all things in heaven and on earth under him.

We thank you that you have opened our eyes to see who he is, that you have brought us to believe your word of truth and that by believing we have inherited every spiritual blessing in him.

We thank you that you are now our Father. We thank you that you have redeemed us in your love.

We thank you for the gift of your Spirit. And we pray, Father, that you would enable us by your Spirit in our hearts to believe these blessings right through us that we would be ready to live for you.

[29 : 28] In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Thank you.