

“God’s Blessings” | Ephesians 1:3-14
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(Discussion questions on page 9)

A gift’s value can change over time. Sometimes it diminishes. What was the best gift ever two Christmases ago, may find itself forgotten in the garage this Christmas. Or the bike you got for your birthday at twelve, you’ve simply long outgrown. Sometimes the value of a gift diminishes over time.

Other times, however, the value of a gift grows. Perhaps you just couldn’t appreciate it at first. Like the ornate multi-ribbon bookmark a mentor gave me at my ordination. Not much at first. But as it turns out, I begin most mornings of my life lifting those ribbons as I open my Bible to meet with God, then placing them just right to prepare for the next day. Or the book embosser (stamp) I got from a friend for being a groomsman in his wedding. Those insignia mark my library, and those stamps will outlast me.

Still other times, we just aren’t mature enough to appreciate a gift’s value, we don’t yet have eyes to see all the blessings it entails. Like in high school, when for graduation my friend’s parents got him a red Ford Mustang, while mine got me a Bible. I was so bummed. But now, these many years later, which gift do you think has been proved the greater blessing?

Gift lies at the core of Christianity. The gift of life. The gift of mercy. The gift of forgiveness. Gift is one of the meanings the word “grace” carried in Jesus’ and Paul’s day. At the heart of Christianity, is the great grace-gift—Jesus Christ.

And Paul’s letters are flooded with this theme of the grace-gift. Near the middle of our passage in Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul speaks of God’s “glorious grace” (1:6), the “riches of his grace” (1:7)—grace God “lavished upon us” (1:6, 7). This is all referring to Jesus Christ—God’s great gift to us—and the blessings that overflow from that fountain.

We are spending a few weeks in Ephesians 1:3-14, and today we will consider the blessings Paul says we have in the gift of Jesus Christ. Paul gives a sort of opening and summary statement about this theme of blessings in verse 3, then elaborates upon the blessings in the rest of the passage:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with **every spiritual blessing** in the heavenly places (Eph 1:3)

Why does Paul call these “spiritual” blessings, and what does it mean that they are “in the heavenly places?” It doesn’t mean that the blessings are immaterial, ethereal, or we only enjoy them in heaven. What it means is that they are blessings that only the Holy Spirit can bring into our lives, and that they originate in heaven—meaning, with God, not with man.

I want to consider what “every spiritual blessing” entails: what type of *gift* these are to us? What does it mean that they come to us “in Christ”? Christ is not just one gift in the Christmas stocking—He is the stocking. And with him, and only with him, we get “every spiritual blessing.” And do we value them? Paul presents these are the choicest of gifts? As we consider them, let us prayerfully ask God to help our hearts taste and see why these are indeed to be called *blessings*.

Here, then, are the three blessings “in Christ” that Paul sets before us, which we will consider: In Christ we receive the spiritual blessings of being **(1) Chosen** [v.4], **(2) Redeemed** [v.7], and **(3) Sealed** [v.13].

I. Chosen

Following verse 3, the first specification of what these blessings entail comes in verse 4, God

[God] blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world (1:3-4).

God’s choosing of us happened before the “foundation of the world,” and is further explain in verse 5, where Paul writes that God “predestined us” (1:5).

In Christian vocabulary, this is the doctrine of election: God’s people don’t choose him; He chooses them.

It was the case with Israel:

The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth (Deut 7:6).

It was the case with Jesus and His disciples:

You did not choose me, but I chose you... (Jn 15:16).

And when it’s stated with the language of “predestination” (God pre-chose us), a word Paul uses twice in our passage (1:5, 11), it often raises questions: *Why did God choose me? Why does it seem God did not choose that person who doesn’t seem to believe? What about my free will and agency?*

What this teaching implies became a hot debate in the days of Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD), as he debated the thought of a British theologian named Pelagius (c. 354–418 AD). The basic nature of their disagreement sheds light, I believe, on how we should approach this teaching today.

Augustine came to see in the teaching about election—God chooses us; we do not choose him—the real nature of the human situation. Once we are infected with sin, we cannot choose God on our own. And this is because choosing God means more than intellectual assent. It means heart devotion—loving him, obeying him, desiring to do his will.

As Augustine explains in his very personal autobiography, *Confessions*, when a man comes to wish to choose the good, he finds himself unable to follow his conscious choice whole-heartedly: for his previous actions, explains Augustine, forged a “chain of habit” in which he was held fast, “not in another’s shackles but in the iron links of my own will. The enemy held my will in his power and from it he has made a chain and shackled me.”¹

Both from his own experience, and the sad experience of battling with the hardened wills of his own congregation, Augustine came to see that the *blessedness* in passages like Ephesians 1:4: God rescues drowning people; we don’t have to swim to him.²

Thinkers like Pelagius, on the other hand, say that we have enough good in us to choose God in our own will power. They fear the idea of election undermines the dignity of the human being.

But what does Paul say? Paul paints a picture in Ephesians 2 where if left to our own, we are simply incapable of loving and following God:

You were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph 2:1-3).

Jesus says as much in John 8

... everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin... So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:34, 35).

So, the point of Paul’s language of election and predestination is not to give us a puzzle to solve. The point is *relief*! The first spiritual blessing Paul specifies is this great hope—that our ultimate destiny does not ultimately depend on us or our willpower, but God. And this decision of God was made tens of thousands of years before we could mess it up: “he chose us in Christ *before the foundation of the world*.”

Consider some of the reasons this gift of election blesses us:

1. For one, it means God really wants us. And not because of anything we have done for him. His choice preceded our actions; his choice is not based on our merit. But as it says in verse 5, “In love, he predestined us.” How relieving it is to know that God acts toward you not based on your merit, but His love.

¹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII.5.

² See Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 166.

2. Second, notice that God chose us to be “holy and blameless before him” (1.4). God is at work in us to make us people of character, who reflect him in how we feel, think, and act. God has turned you away from running headlong into wickedness. As the seventeenth-century pastor, Thomas Goodwin, writes of this verse:

Indeed, to be converted to God and turned from iniquity is a greater blessing than if God should make every one of you kings and rulers of worlds, and create variety and multiplicity of them for each of you.

3. Third, notice what God chooses us for—to be his children: “He predestined us for adoption as sons” (1.5). The image of adoption was well-known in the Greek and Roman world of Paul’s readers. And it didn’t merely underscore someone gaining an imitate family; it has a legal implications, too. It meant that the one adopted now *belonged*, legally, to the father who adopted them. While this has implications about our sharing in the father’s possessions, consider that it also means that because we belong to God, we no longer ultimately belong to the world, or the power of Satan, or to ourselves. We are God’s possession!

[T] That is the spiritual blessing of being chosen. Second, we come to redemption.

II. Redemption

Picking up in verse 7,

In him we have **redemption** through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace (1:7)

Verse seven helps us understand why all these blessings only happen “in Christ.” God chose us “in Christ” (v 4) because God could only choose to embrace sinners by simultaneously having a plan to deal with their sin. This is what verse 7 explains.

To be redeemed, is to be bought back. When humans sin, they land on the wrong side of the cosmic scales of justice. They owe a debt to the scales of justice. They come to exist under the wrath of God—which is simply the pure and perfect justice of God. God sends his Son to pay the penalty for their sin, and in doing so, creates a way both to satisfy justice and to offer sinners forgiveness.

And notice the term “**blood**.” Paul doesn’t say we are redeemed by Christ’s “prayers,” or his “teaching” or his “example”—all things that Christ applies to us with great impact. No. It is **blood** Paul mentions. And this reminds us that our release from the punishment and penalty for sin required the bloody crucifixion of Jesus Christ. A sacrifice, in our place, had to be made. Notice how the words of our Anglican Communion Liturgy, going all the way back to 1662, capture the essence of Ephesian here:

All praise and glory is yours, O God our heavenly Father, for in your tender mercy, you gave your only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our **redemption**. He made

there, by his one [offering] of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world (*Book of Common Prayer*, 1662)

What blessing to we experience in this feature of the gift—the gift of God’s Son giving his life on the cross for us? We scarcely can imagine.

1. First, we are given a window into the heart of God toward us—both in his hatred of our sin and his love of our life. The cross tells you how much God *hates* sin—especially the sin he has poured out his wrath upon that is yours. As we come to see the wretchedness of our own sin, we come to hate it more and more. But God hates it with a passion we scarcely feel. Just look at the cross—that is how much God abhors the sin that ruins His creation and mocks His Great Name. And in dying in your place, God simultaneously shows you how much he loves you! We tend to think our mental health depends on self-love. It is far more important, friends, that through the cross we come to see that our life depends on divine-love.

Some of the greatest gifts are those that speak to us about someone’s heart toward us. A woman will cherish a necklace that reminds her of her husband’s heart for her. A child will cherish a souvenir that reminds them how their parent thinks about them, even when thousands of miles away traveling. The gift of Christ’s redemption on the cross reminds us, again and again, of the heart God has towards us.

2. Secondly, the blessing of the gift of redemption is felt in our spiritual and psychological need for a clean conscience. Guilt and shame are by-products of sin, the way aches and pains are a by-products of the flu—and they weigh heavy on the psyche and soul. Try as we might, denying guilt does not, ultimately, free us from it.

E.g., *Anna Karenina*: In Tolstoy’s novel, *Anna Karenina*, Anna betrays her husband, Alexei, and carries on an affair with a young cavalry officer, Vronsky, with whom she becomes pregnant. When the child is born, Anna lies dying in her home. The severity of the moment—newborn child, dying mother—brings both Anna’s lover and husband into the room.

Though dying physically, Anna’s spiritual torture is more severe. She takes her husband by the hand:

[T]here is another woman in me, I’m afraid of her—she fell in love with that man.... I’m dying now, I know I’ll die.... There’s one thing I need: forgive me, forgive me completely! I’m terrible! No you can’t forgive me! I know this can’t be forgiven!³

Alexi—her husband, begins to cry. Anna then calls her lover, Vronsky (who’s cowering in the corner) to come to the bedside, too, and asks him to give her husband his hand. Vronsky is overtaken with shame and can only cover his face before the husband of his

³ Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2006), 412.

lover. Shockingly, Alexi takes this man's hand, drawing them away from his cowering face, revealing a "terrible expression of suffering and shame," and forgives him.⁴

The human soul, as it stands before God, is not like our minds that can conveniently forget things. All our sin sits there upon our soul, before the all-seeing eyes of God. So don't you now see why Paul is extolling the spiritual blessings we have in Christ! Because, as he says in verse 7, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses (1:7)!"

You can have a clean conscience before God—in and through Christ. There is not a gift your parents, or children, or spouse, or friend, can give you. This is a spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, whereby God's son is rejected, so you can be excepted.

Our blessings in Christ include being chosen and redeemed, and also, finally, "sealed."

III. Sealed

In verses 11-14, Paul looks to the future—our inheritance—and says that we have been

sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it (1:13-14).

The word "sealed" as used here doesn't have the sense of tightening a lid on a jar. Rather, implies a mark of identification—like a seal on a letter, or brand on livestock. It is a mark of identification and ownership. For Paul, this image is meant to convey comfort and assurance: it means that we are marked out to be protected by God, and the seal gives us the assurance that we really are God's children.⁵

If this sealing is meant to give us assurance—to be the "guarantee of our inheritance"—then what can we say about the experience of it. In asking this question we must be careful not to reduce our salvation to a subjective (emotional) experience; and we recognize that our experiences in this life can go up and down. But it does seem that there is a sense of the Spirit's sealing that is meant to be reassuring to us. What might this sense involve?

1. First, this sealing is experienced in believing the Gospel, as verse 13 demonstrates: "When you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation and believed in him, were sealed with the promised holy spirit" (1:13). Faith, then, even of the size of a mustard seed, is evidence that God's spirit is at work in you, sealing you as one of God's children.

If we recall what Paul says in Romans 8:15-17—a passage that is also about being chosen, adopted as God's children, given the Holy Spirit and assurance—we can see a few more things:

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See also 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, "And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us,²² and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee."

you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him (Rom 8:15-17).

2. So second, the seal of the Spirit would be experienced as the Spirit helps our heart feel that God is not merely a distant, powerful deity, but our *father*, our *dad*. “By the spirit we cry, Abba, Father!” The Spirit will cultivate a childlike dependence on God as our father inside of us. So if you find yourself regularly crying out (inwardly or audibly), “Father, please help me!” That is an experience of the sealing of the Spirit.

3. And finally, the Spirit’s seal may be felt in the conviction of sin. In John 16, Jesus speaks of the Spirit as having a ministry that includes “convicting of sin and righteous and judgement” (Jn 16:8). If your conscience will not allow you to finally embrace sin, or to sin with no sense of guilt at all, that is a sign of the Spirit at work in you.

So, in your experience of faith, or the fatherhood of God, of conviction of sin, you are running your hands over the wax seal that God has placed upon your heart—and that seal read’s, “God’s property.” And what is God’s, bought with the blood of his Son, will not be taken out of his hands.

Sum: In Christ, we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing, says Paul. Now let me ask you—you who are parents. Could you give your children a gift greater than this? Greater than God’s election, redemption, and sealing?

And Christian, amidst the ups and downs of life, would you trade these blessings for any others?

The value of a gift may change. And sometimes our hearts are not yet able, or our eyes not yet mature enough, to see the real value in a gift. But there is a reason Paul opens this passage, “Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” (1:3). Paul has felt the weight of glory in the gift that is Jesus Christ, and in all these blessings that flow from that fountain. And therefore, Paul is a man who—not matter how much suffering or injustice he may face—lives in the happy atmosphere of a heart overflowing with gratitude.

As we close, I’ll quote the old pastor Thomas Goodwin once more:

Let him be miserable that can be, for I cannot, may a believer say to all others in the world.
For can that man be ever miserable that is blessed with all blessings?

Let’s pray.

Small Group Questions

1. Can you think of examples of gifts you have received that have diminished in value over time? What are some gifts that have grown in value over time, even in ways that have surprised you?
2. Christianity presents Jesus as God's great grace-gift to us, and in this passage, Paul says that in Jesus God has "blessed us with every spiritual blessing" (Eph 1:3). What are some blessings that you have experienced in Jesus? Does your heart find it easy or natural to value these blessings?
3. The first blessing Paul specifies is that "God chose us...predestine us for adoption" (Eph 1:4-5). This teaching confuses people at times. Read Ephesians 2:1-3. What does it tell us about the human condition? With this in mind, why might God's "election" of you be necessary, and good news? [For more on the Anglican teaching about election, see Article 17 of the Thirty-Nine Articles].
4. The second blessing Paul enumerates is redemption (Eph 1:7), which is through Christ "blood." Why couldn't God redeem us simply by choosing us and calling us? Why did Christ have to *die* for us?
5. In verse 13, Paul speaks of God "sealing" people with the "promised Holy Spirit." Sometimes it is hard to understand how the Spirit works in our lives. A few ways include cultivating faith in Christ, conviction of sin, and a deepening trust that God is our Father (see Rom 8:14-17). Have you experienced the Spirit's work in these areas? If so, recognize this as God's seal on you—his marker that you are his.