

Introduction

This morning I want to continue our gentle stroll through Paul's wonderful Epistle to the believers in Ephesus. Last month we looked at the opening two verses and so today I want to move on to look on the next four verses in Ephesians 1 plus one or two other related verses in **Ephesians 1 & 2**.

Our Bible translations, whichever you prefer, contain quite a few sentences in the passage **1:3-14**. In the original Greek those verses constitute a single sentence and so we are dependent on the Bible translators and commentators to help us out. That may go some way to explain the slight variations between Bible translations and why opinions differ between Commentaries on this Epistle.

To try and overcome that problem, I have read a number of translations, consulted a number of Commentaries and watched a number of videos of sermons and Bible Studies talking about this passage. With God's help I hope and pray that what I have to say to you today isn't too wide of the mark.

After opening in **1:3** with bi-directional blessings, Paul moves on in **1:4-6** and a few of the following verses to discuss the tricky subject of election and predestination; in other words, how God knows who will accept Christ as Saviour by coming to faith in Him.

Part 1 – Blessings

Paul opens this short section of **1:3-6** with a series of blessings in **1:3**. He writes, "*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.*" It is only right and proper that we should praise God for all that He does for us each day. However, the ESV and NASB put this verse slightly differently when they say, "*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*", thereby placing a greater emphasis on blessings and very importantly, these blessings are bi-directional; that is, from us to God and God to us!

Firstly, we bless God, something that can include praise. Lest we have forgotten, Paul reminds us that God is the Father of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Just think about that for a moment and consider just how much God has done for us through Jesus. He sent Jesus into the world to be with us and to live among us as an ordinary person would. God then allowed His Son to be abused verbally and physically before being hung on a cross to die to pay the price for our sins. Since Jesus was a Man as well as the Son of God He would have suffered great pain at the hands of the Romans and yet never once complained just as Isaiah prophesied in **Isaiah 53:7** when he wrote: "*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*" Jesus was obedient to His Father because He knew His Father's plan was that He would be the sacrifice Whose blood would be spilt to pay for the sins of those who accepted Him as Lord and Saviour. Whilst Jesus paid the price on the cross of Calvary we should never lose sight of the fact that God willingly sacrificed His Son because He loves us. The Apostle John tells us exactly that in

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that well known verse **John 3:16** where he reminds us that, "... God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Jesus dying on the cross was the greatest gift that anyone could ever give and all who accept Christ as Lord and Saviour are able to partake in that gift. It is a gift that brings with it forgiveness for our sins, the adoption into God's family and the never ending gift of God's grace. At the moment we come to faith in Christ we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. From then on we are regularly "*topped up*" by the Holy Spirit as the need arises. The American evangelist, D L Moody, was once asked why he needed this regular infilling and replied that it was "*because I leak*"¹! In a later work published in 2001, many years after his death, Moody said, "*The fact is, we are leaky vessels, and we have to keep right under the fountain all the time to keep full of Christ, and so have fresh supply.*"²

Secondly, we see God blessing us and rather interestingly He blesses us "*in the heavenly realms*". There are a number of ways in which this is expressed since we can read "*heavenly places*" or "*heavenly realms*" in different parts of Scripture and the original Greek uses a word that translates as "*heavenlies*". The word "*realm*" carries with it the meaning of kingdom or empire or dominion. These all occupy not just heaven but all of God's supernatural heavenly realm; His entire dominion and His entire creation. The same phrase is also used in **1:20**, **2:6** and **3:10** and it refers to our eternal dwelling place. Scripture tells us that we are citizens of heaven although we live here on earth; our place of residence doesn't take away that citizenship. For example, I lived in South Africa for a number of years but remained a citizen of the UK whilst still being a registered resident of South Africa; my citizenship of the UK wasn't affected in any way. Paul confirms our heavenly citizenship in his letter to the Philippians and later in this letter to the Ephesians. Paul told the Philippians: "... *our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ*" (**Philippians 3:20a**). In the next chapter of this Epistle to the Ephesians Paul wrote that we are "*fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household*" (**Ephesians 2:19**).

These blessings from God only come to those who place their faith in Jesus as their Saviour. Paul wrote to the Galatians and told them, "*So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.*" (**Galatians 3:9**). God loves everyone but He also wants everyone to come to faith in His Son, and on those who do come to faith in Christ, God showers His blessings and His love, mercy and grace.

We receive these blessings from God on a daily basis although I suspect we rarely remember to say thank you. Just as God blesses us, He Himself is worthy of all our praise for what He does for us. Whilst this verse may talk of spiritual blessings "*in the heavenlies*", many of our blessings come in material form: food, clothing, somewhere to live, family, money, job or income. All of these come without our necessarily asking and so it is right that we should praise God for them. We also need to remember that we should bless and

¹ Moody, D L, Reference unknown

² Moody, D L, *The Secret of Success in the Christian Life*, Moody Publishers: Chicago, 2001, page 36

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praise God in all things, when times are good and when they are bad; blessings and praise of God go hand in hand.

Thirdly, we are told that these blessings are “*in Christ*”. I’ve already mentioned that such blessings are only available to those who have faith in Christ. That means we need to be united with Him in our daily lives to receive these blessings since He is the Source of them and no one else is able to provide the type of blessings that we receive from God through His Son. These blessings show that we are complete “*in Him*” just as Paul told the Colossians, “*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ*” (Colossians 2:9-10) The NLT puts those two verses slightly differently when it translates them as, “*For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.*” It is that phrase in Colossians 2:10 that stands out since it confirms that we are “*complete through [y]our union with Christ*”, in other words our lives are complete “*in Him*”. The American Pastor and preacher, John MacArthur suggests that, “*We receive our heavenly blessings by living in the power of God’s Holy Spirit.*”³ We can only receive that power from the Holy Spirit if we are “*in Christ*” for it is only through Him that we receive the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

There is a glorious old hymn that we may have sung from time to time titled “*Praise God from Whom all blessings flow*”. It only has four lines which say this, “*Praise God from Whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below, praise Him above, ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*” We could do worse than remember those words as they sum up the way that we should offer our praises to God for all the blessings that we receive from Him.

Part 2 – Predestined

Having looked at the wonderful blessings that we both give and receive, Paul now moves on in the next few verses to talk about the amazing fact that we have been chosen by God to be part of His family and to receive salvation. Not only have we been chosen but we were chosen before time began and although that may sound impossible to our finite minds and extremely difficult for us to grasp, it is all part of God’s amazing plan for His kingdom and His family. There is a line in a fairly modern song that goes, “*How wonderful to be a part of God’s amazing plan*”.

All that Paul talks about here regarding our being chosen was planned by God. When talking about this Paul tells us in 1:5 that our being chosen was all “*in accordance with his [that is, God’s] pleasure and will*”. He continues in 1:11 by adding our being predestined was “*according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will*”. There’s yet more to come. God didn’t do all this on a whim; He had two thoughts in mind; His first thought being the forgiveness of our sins; and the second being our adoption into His family. On that first point Paul tells us in 1:7 that since we have been

³ MacArthur, John, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary - Ephesians*, Moody Publishers: Chicago, 1986, page 9

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predestined by God “*we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace*”. Earlier in **1:5** Paul gives us the wonderful news that God “*predestined us to be adopted as his sons*”.

Those words “*in accordance with*” and “*in conformity with*” come from the same Greek word. Our being chosen by God to be in His family comes about as being part of His pleasure and will and according to the plan that He established before time began. Paul actually says that in **1:4** where we read God put this plan together, “*before the creation of the world*”. The ESV and NASB put it as being “*before the foundation of the world*”.

The theological term for this is election or predestination and whilst those words may sound a bit daunting it may be easier to look at it this way. Let me give you an example, there are many occasions when a young footballer or cricketer is identified as being extremely talented; they are often said to be destined for a great future. That means that at some time to come someone thinks they will develop into a great player. That opinion obviously comes after they have been seen and observed. However, in the case of our having been chosen before time began we haven't been seen, observed, born or even conceived. And yet God knew even at that stage just who would be saved and who wouldn't. He knew and still knows what will happen to us in the future. He knows who will accept Jesus' invitation to salvation and who will ignore or reject it. How amazing is that?

Just think about Paul for a moment. God knew at the time of creation that Paul would be a great persecutor of the followers of Jesus Christ but that he would also eventually come to faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Let me give you two further examples. Firstly, think about the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is a great example of someone who we are told was predestined by God to be a prophet. Jeremiah records God's words to him when God said “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.*” (**Jeremiah 1:5**) I can imagine that that statement must have taken the wind out of Jeremiah's sails but may also have offered some reassurance to know that he was working in the will of God. Secondly, consider one of those two thieves on the cross. Francis spoke to us recently (30 Jan 2022) about those thieves who were on the crosses flanking Jesus; one abused Jesus whilst the other rebuked his partner in crime and told him to be quiet since whilst they deserved to be there Jesus was totally innocent. Having quietened his co-criminal the thief asked Jesus to remember him when His kingdom came, Jesus replied “*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.*” (**Luke 23:43**) This thief was one of God's elect and I doubt that any of us would have expected him to be forgiven and join Jesus in heaven as one of God's family. God of course had other ideas; that thief was part of His plan. The same applies to us; regardless of what we may think, God knows who will place their faith in Christ and who won't.

The problem we have is that not only do we struggle to understand how God does this but we don't know who He chooses or why and we may well be surprised when we see who has been chosen and is one of the elect. Remember that God can change people's lives in the blink of an eye and so those who we may think would never ever be saved are suddenly preaching the gospel and living their lives in company with Christ.

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Let's just step back a little and consider God's creation very briefly. Before the world came into being everything was perfect. That perfect place lasted until the second week when, having created Adam at the end of **Genesis 1**, God created Eve in **Genesis 2** and she ate the forbidden fruit in **Genesis 3**. At that point sin entered the world and from that moment on everyone following Adam & Eve inherited that sin meaning that we were all sinners. Remember that this was all part of God's plan which means that all those chosen to be part of His family were sinners as well. There was no one who was perfect; no one who wasn't a sinner. That leads us to the situation where when we read in **1:4** "*For he chose us in him before the creation of the world ...*" God knew that the elect would all be sinners. I don't know about you but I find that to be quite an amazing thought. However, this is God we are talking about and we need to remember that it is He Who does the choosing and Paul acknowledges that fact in his first letter to the Corinthians. When talking about those who were called he doesn't mention them being sinners as such but does point out that God chose those who weren't wise by human standards nor were they people of influence nor of noble birth; human wisdom, levels of influence and rank in society count for nothing in God's eyes. Paul continues by adding that God "*chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things*" (**1 Corinthians 1:27-28**). All of this came about as a result of God's grace and didn't involve man's efforts in any way lest they should boast. Paul explains this far better than I can when he says in **2:8-9** "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no-one can boast.*"

As we see in **2:8** our being chosen is all through God's amazing grace and brings with it our redemption and forgiveness from our sins; together with His unconditional love for us and the great mercy He shows towards us. I intend to take a closer look at redemption and grace in future sermons.

There is a problem with predestination that you may or may not have yet considered. The conundrum is this: if God knows who will accept His graceful invitation to come to faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, why should we bother with evangelism? Why should we try and win souls for Christ? If people are going to be saved anyway what's the point? Why should Francis and his BCM Colleagues be out in all weathers preaching the gospel? Those may appear to be valid questions but totally miss an important point. God knows who will join His family but we, and perhaps equally importantly those who will accept that invitation, don't know. Salvation doesn't happen automatically without anything happening on the part of the invitee; people still need to hear the gospel and they still need to repent and come to faith in Christ. God created mankind with free will; meaning we are able to decide for ourselves rather than being pre-programmed automatons. That means that whilst some will accept that Christ died for them, there will be those who turn a deaf ear to what God is saying meaning of course, that if people aren't saved it isn't God's fault. Despite that Peter makes clear that "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*" (**2 Peter 3:9**) Yes, God knows who will accept His gracious offer of forgiveness in Christ but that offer still needs to be made and the appropriate decision still needs to be made. It is vital therefore, that we keep preaching the gospel and evangelising the community. Paul told the Romans "*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how*

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can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Romans 10:14-15)

Very obviously the most important point in all this is the role played by Christ Himself. He is the catalyst and pivotal point in predestination. Not only do all the blessings that we receive come *"in Christ"* (1:3) but Paul adds in 1:5 that God *"predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ"*. It is the act of Jesus sacrificing His life on the cross of Calvary that enables us to receive God's pre-planned invitation to salvation and to our responding positively by coming to faith in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

In 1:4 Paul tells us that God *"chose us in Him"*, the *"Him"* in this case being Jesus Christ. It is in this way that we are united in Christ in our daily lives for evermore. This isn't an isolated instance since Paul repeatedly uses that and similar phrases in 1:4-14 such as *"through Jesus Christ"* (1:5); *"in Him"* (1:7, 1:11) and *"in Christ"* (1:9, 1:12, 1:13). They all carry the same meaning; we were chosen to be united with Christ; in His life, death and resurrection.

If we were elected or chosen before the foundation of the world then it surely follows that Jesus Christ was also chosen before creation. Peter confirms that in 1 Peter 1:20 where he writes, *"He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake."* Peter is referring to the fact that it was during these *"last times"* that Jesus was born and conducted His earthly ministry, and it is Jesus Who is the source of our salvation having shed His blood and died on the cross in our place to pay for our sins. Paul's frequent uses of the phrases *"in Him"*, *"in Jesus Christ"* and *"through Christ"* in Ephesians tell us that all that happens to us is as a result of the actions of Jesus. Peter says something similar at the beginning of 1 Peter 1:21 when he reminds us that it is *"through Him you believe in God"*. Sadly it wasn't always the case that people believed in Jesus. Peter further reminds us of that in 1 Peter 2:4 where he says that Jesus was *"... the living Stone — rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him"*. Many rejected Jesus even though God had chosen Him to be our Lord and Saviour and to be the living stone in His church. As we think about these things let us all come before Christ with open hearts and minds and not reject Him as our ancestors did.

Conclusion

I hope you found those verses to be as amazing and uplifting as I do. They are filled with details of our relationship with God because of what Christ did for us at Calvary. In 1:3 we saw that when we come to faith in Christ we receive a constant flow of blessings; not just here on earth but also awaiting us in the *"heavenlies"*. What a glorious prospect to know that before we even arrive in paradise such blessings are already there awaiting us.

In 1:4-6 and others we learned that God chose those who would believe in Him from before the foundation of the world. That's right; before anything existed God chose those who would follow Him. The theological term for this is election or predestination and really means that God marked us out as future believers in Him through His Son Jesus Christ before time began. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't be involved in evangelism or

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reaching out to non-believers. Quite the opposite, we should re-double our efforts. We should never forget that whilst God knows who will accept Christ, we don't and neither do they. We must keep on preaching the gospel so that non-believers can hear the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. We know that some, perhaps all too many, will reject that message but we must persevere. God is a loving and forgiving God and as Peter tells us, He wants everyone to come to faith. As I mentioned earlier, Peter reminds us, "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*" (2 Peter 3:9)

For all those who have come to faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour it is amazing to contemplate the fact that God chose you before the foundation of His universe. For those who do not yet know Christ, it is not yet too late to seek God's forgiveness and come to faith in Jesus.