

“Blessed”
Ephesians 1:3-14
07.04.21

Introduction

When I was in seminary, I signed up for a class called Exegesis of Ephesians. It was being offered at the 600 level, and to complete my program I needed to take a course from that particular section at a 700 level.

So, I petitioned the professor and he agreed to let me take it at a 700 level, but he said that I would have to do the same amount of work as the PhD students. He explained that my weekly assignments would be more difficult, and for the final, I would be required to write a fifteen-page research paper on any passage in Ephesians of my choice, as well as give an oral translation from Greek to English from any passage of his choosing.

It was the beginning of the semester. I was ambitious and desperate and so I agreed to the terms and conditions. I should also mention that I was taking three other graduate courses at the time which my third semester of biblical Greek. To say that I was stretched would be an understatement. I had to pull an all-nighter at least once a week to get everything turned in.

On the morning of my final, I was so nervous about having to do an oral translation that I walked out of the class, called Alisha in the hallway, and told her I was going to talk to the registrar to see if it was too late for me to drop the class...on the day of the final exam. Thankfully she talked me into going back in and facing my fears, and by the grace of God, I was able to translate the passage he assigned me that day without any problems. I also worked with my faculty advisor from that point forward to put together a more manageable schedule.

I learned a lot studying Ephesians that semester and one of the things that really stuck with me is that some of the earliest manuscripts omit the word “Ephesus” in the very first verse. Ephesians is also unique from Paul’s other letters in the fact that he does not address a particular problem that the congregation is facing. As a result of these two features, a growing number of scholars believe that the letter was intended to function as a general primer on the Christian faith for Gentiles and that it was not originally intended for a particular audience.¹ Since Ephesus was the capital of Asia Minor, someone eventually plugged the name in near the beginning to give it a stronger identity.

I think there’s a lot of credibility to this theory, which makes Ephesians both unique and incredibly practical. In the first three chapters, Paul writes about the mechanics of salvation. You may have noticed in our Scripture reading today that the opening chapter is like trying to drink from a fire hydrant: there is a lot of dense material to absorb.

¹ F. Thielman. *Ephesians*. 2010. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Then, the final three chapters of Ephesians is filled with exhortations for how to put the Christian faith into practice. In essence, Paul is telling the Church, “This is what God has done for you in Christ Jesus, and this is how you should live in response.”

Over the next several weeks, I hope you will spend some time in Ephesians. If you read one chapter a day, you can read Ephesians once a week with an extra day to spare. It has some of the richest teaching in the New Testament on what it means to belong to the body of Christ.

Digging Deeper

Another thing that I learned in my semester of studying Ephesians in great depth is that our entire Scripture reading today is one single sentence in Greek (twelve verses), and it is the longest sentence in the entire Greek New Testament.² This monstrous sentence begins in verse three with Paul saying, “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...”

Take a moment and let that sink in. As followers of Christ, we have been blessed with “every spiritual blessing in heavenly places...” In the remainder of this enormous sentence, Paul attempts to unpack what this looks like. These blessings include seven verbs of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.³ God has *chosen* before the foundation of the world; *adopted* us into the family of God; *redeemed* us through the sacrifice of Christ; made us heirs of the grace that God has lavished on us; and sealed us with the Holy Spirit (just to name a few).

This should be enough to evoke a grateful response, but it is important to realize this is simply what God is saving us *to*. In the next chapter, Paul explains all that God has saved us *from*—all of our sin, guilt, and shame. In other words, the message of Ephesians is about how God has saved us from our immense brokenness while simultaneously saving us to be heirs with Christ. No wonder Paul claims that we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places.

Reflection #1

One of my favorite movies of all times is Forrest Gump. There is just something so inspiring about an underdog who faces insurmountable challenges and rises to a level of excellence most of us cannot even imagine. Forrest excels at everything he puts his hand to (e.g., football, ping pong, the military, and running).

There is one person who deserves the credit for all of Forrest’s accomplishments, and it is not Jenny. In fact, it is not even Forrest. The person who deserves credit for his success is his mama.

² M. Barth. *Ephesians 1-3*. 1974. New York: Doubleday Publishing.

³ E. Peterson. *Practice Resurrection*. 2010. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

From the beginning of the movie, we learn that Forrest's mother is willing to do anything and everything to make sure her son succeeds in life. And as he moves through various stations in life, we get to know Forrest's mother vicariously through his conversations.

When someone tempts Forrest to do something foolish or unkind, he responds, "Mama always says..." and we get to hear her wisdom. It's almost as if Forrest cannot get over the investment that his mother has made in his life and so she appears in his words and actions.

I think that's the message of Ephesians in a nutshell. God has taken us from a lowly status and elevated us to be heirs with Christ. We cannot take credit for our lives or who we have become because God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places, and we should never be able to get over it. As a result, people should see and hear Christ in all that we say and do as a reflection of our gratitude.

Reflection #2

One way of wrapping our minds around what Paul is saying is that when we are saved from our sin we change our address to "in Christ." I counted this prepositional phrase seven times just in today's Scripture text—a phrase that appears more than one hundred and fifty times in all of Paul's letters!

Being "in Christ" means that we have mysteriously and mystically participated in the death of Christ and our lives become walking billboards of the resurrection. The best way for us to let others know that we have been redeemed is to offer our praise and worship of God, not just within the walls of the church, but everywhere we go and everything we do. The best way for others to know that we have a new life in Christ is to live like it, and that is the greatest expression of worship.

Invitation

We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places. Let's live like it. Let's let the blessings flow from our lives into the lives of others.

Reference Tools

Barth, Markus. *Ephesians 1-3 Vol. II*. 1974: New York. Doubleday.

Hawthorne, Gerald. Martin, Ralph. Reid, Daniel. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. 1993. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Peterson, Eugene. *Practice Resurrection*. 2010. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is something that your mama (or a motherly figure) “always says” that you will forever remember?
2. What do you think it means that God has adopted you into the family? (Ephesians 1:5)
3. As you read through Paul’s “monstrous” sentence in Ephesians 1:3-14, what are some of the aspects of salvation that he mentions that you would like to understand better?
4. Paul’s explanation of being heirs of “every spiritual blessing in heavenly places” should prompt us into extravagant worship both inside the church and in our every day lives. What does this look like for you? What are ways you can grow in your admiration and gratitude for what God has done for you in Christ Jesus?
5. How have you witnessed God’s grace recently?
6. How can we pray for you?