

# When the Blessings Come Down...

Good to see you guys. If you have your bibles, go ahead and turn Ephesians 1. Last week, we spent our entire time sifting just two verses to see what all we could draw out of them. Today, we're doing just the opposite. **Our passage today has to be one of the most jam-packed passages of Scripture in the entire New Testament.** And to add to that, **the whole thing, v. 3-14, is all one sentence in the original language.** No English bible translation even *attempts* to pull that off grammatically, but that's how it was written. One long, glorious run-on sentence. One scholar said that this is the "*most monstrous sentence conglomeration that I have ever found in the Greek language.*" Which I think is a scholarly way of saying "this sentence is very long and very confusing."

So, **we are about to wade through one of the more dense, complex passages in the bible.** The theological ideas sort of just hit you in waves, one right after another. Honestly we could have done like a six-week series just on the verses we're covering today—you're probably gonna feel some of that as we work through it. But Paul does it all in one sentence, so we're going to attempt doing it all in one teaching. All that to say, today's teaching is going to be *loaded* with content. But if you can make it through today, much of the rest of the book will probably seem like a cakewalk to you. So let's get to it:

*[3] 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,*

So this part has a poetic rhythm to it in the Greek. It's a riff of sorts—*bless* God, who has *blessed* us, with *blessings*. "Blessed be" is an almost a command. Paul is saying "let's bless God for blessing us with every spiritual blessing." So what does that mean exactly, "every spiritual blessing"? Well, first off, you need to know that in the bible, **blessings are given, not earned.** So Chance the Rapper says "when the praises go up, what? *The blessings come dow-own.*" Okay, but here's the thing: that's a great line for a song, but that's not *exactly* how blessings work. I'll give Chance a pass because his music is so amazing, but this is actually significant understanding many people have. The default belief for a lot of people is that if we live a life that God is happy with, that he will in turn bless us. But in the bible, those are called "*rewards*," not "blessings." **Paul's point in this passage is not that God has blessed us because of something we did for him. It's actually precisely the opposite—that God has blessed us just because—out of the overflow of love and grace and generosity in his heart.** Not because we praised him, or made good decisions for him, or did good things for him. Blessings are *given*, not earned.

And next, Paul is going to go on to *list out* some of these spiritual blessings he is referring to. But before we dive into what they are, you should know that **for the Jewish people in his audience, the language Paul uses in this passage would've been absolutely loaded with meaning.** Each idea that he introduces would've conjured up all sorts of ideas and emotions for the Jewish people hearing it. It would be kind of like if Paul was writing to you and I today and kept using words like "freedom" and "independence" and "emancipation." Those are all just words with basic meanings, but behind each word is a whole host of emotions and ideas and history we associate with the word because we're Americans. In the same way, many of the words Paul uses in this passage would've had loaded meanings to the Jewish people who were reading it. So I'm gonna do my best to quickly, with each word, help you feel what they would have felt. First up, v. 4:

[4] even as he **chose** us in him before the foundation of the world, **that** we should be holy and blameless before him. In love [5] he **predestined** us for **adoption** to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, [6] to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

Paul says that **one of the ways that God has blessed us—and one of the reasons we should praise him—is that he has chosen us to be holy and blameless, and predestined us for adoption.** Now, as some of you in the room may already know, those two words—*chosen* and *predestined*—have been the source of much tension, debate, controversy, division, and sometimes outright animosity in the Church over the past several hundred years. Pastors have argued with each other about this, churches have split over this, denominations have formed over this—these words are *quite the big deal* in church world. And so this morning it is my great privilege...to avoid talking about that controversy *entirely*. And there's at least a few reasons why. First, **because a lot of you simply don't care about it.** The fact that these verses are controversial might even come as brand new information to some of you. Second, **because I simply don't think I have anything worthwhile to add.** The reality is that this debate has been taking place between a lot of people way smarter than me for hundreds of years—I don't think I'm going to settle it today.

But *most importantly*, I'm not planning on speaking to that simply **because that isn't the question Paul is trying to answer.** Believe it or not, Paul didn't write this book nearly 2000 years ago to speak to a debate that has only been around for 300 years. I know that because of how math and time work, but also because the language Paul uses isn't even primarily individual language—it's *communal* language. In other words, Paul's intention in writing this passage isn't to say "hey this person is obviously chosen, and this person—welp, Godspeed sir." That's not how it's written. His intention, rather, is to say "how incredible is it that God has called out a *group of people* to make himself known to the world. What an *incredible* reality that is. Let's worship him for that." **So rather than trying to teach this passage as if Paul wrote it to settle an argument between theological teams, I'd rather try and unpack it the way he originally meant for it to be read.** So that's what we're going to attempt today.

So let's start with what it means that we are "chosen." In v. 4, it says that God *chose* us in order that we should be holy and blameless. Now, this idea of being "chosen" is plucked directly out of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God had *chosen* a group of people—the nation of Israel—to be his handpicked representatives to the rest of the world. For example, take a look at Deuteronomy 7:

[6] "For you are a people **holy** to the Lord your God. 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.

Now, you may read that and think "well isn't that kind of dangerous for God to do? I mean, if chooses only *one* group of people, won't that make them very arrogant, very condescending towards other groups of people? Isn't that going to puff them up with pride, thinking that God chose them instead of everybody else?" Well, hold that thought, because look at v. 7:

[7] **It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you,** [so think, in the ancient world, the more numerous your nation was, the more formidable they were in forming armies, fighting wars, etc. 'It wasn't because of how

numerous you are that you were chosen...] *for you were the fewest of all peoples, [8] but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers...*

In other words, God *knew* that the Israelites might be tempted to think it was something about them that made him choose them. And so on a regular basis, he goes out of his way to make it *abundantly clear* that that's not why they were chosen. Here, he says "it was not because you were more numerous than other nations that I chose you. If I wanted to pick the most *powerful* nation, y'all wouldn't have even made the cut." As another example of this, look at this verse from just a couple chapters later, in Deuteronomy 9:6:

*Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people.*

**So God apparently doesn't choose people because they're awesome or because their valuable assets to his team.** I say that because picks the Israelites who are 1) puny and 2) stubborn. Not exactly an all-star crew. **So what we can glean from that is that neither Israel, nor us today, are chosen because of how impressive we are. That's not it at all. God chooses us out of his pure mercy and grace.** And he apparently has a habit of choosing the most *unlikely* candidates.

I think a great example of this is a kid named Ryan McKenna. Let me show you a picture of Ryan [show photo #1]. Do any of you know who this is? Okay, let me show you another photo of him that might help [show photo #2]. Now do you recognize him? Yep, Ryan was the kid Justin Timberlake chose to take a selfie with at the Super Bowl this year. The internet literally could not generate memes fast enough to keep up when it happened. Now, I'm sure Ryan McKenna is a great kid. But Ryan was not chosen by Justin Timberlake because of how great he was. Ryan was chosen because he had a smartphone and an aisle seat. That was it. And then he became famous. But all of his "fame" really had nothing to do with him—it had everything to do with Justin Timberlake. He was chosen simply because of the grace and generosity in JT's heart. And *that's* closer to the type of "chosen" Paul is talking about here. **It has nothing to do with our impressiveness, and everything to do with God's grace and generosity.**

So we're chosen, and it says God chooses us "*...that we might be holy and blameless in his sight.*" So while God does not choose us *because of* how holy we are, he *does* choose us *for the purpose of becoming* holy and blameless. Now this is important. Because some people will say, theologically, that if you are *chosen* by God, it doesn't matter at all what you do—you're always chosen. You can disobey or run from God as much as you want to, and that doesn't matter because you're locked in for life. But I think framing it that way misses the point a little. Because if God chooses us *for the purpose of being holy and blameless*, it would seem that an overall lack of concern about *being holy or blameless* is revealing that we *aren't really chosen*. In other words, **if as you go through life, you care little to nothing about becoming more like Jesus, you have radically misunderstood what it means to follow him.** That's what the first part tells us.

But then Paul lays over top of that idea that we are also "predestined for *adoption as sons.*" Now this adds a whole new dimension to what he's saying. **Because the nation of Israel knew they were chosen, but none of them previously would've thought of themselves as God's sons.** That's a level of personal with God that they didn't even think was possible. So Paul here takes an idea they're familiar

with—being chosen—and he lays over top of it that being chosen means that God sets them apart as his kids. They've been *adopted* into God's family.

And the thing about adoption is that it's *permanent*. I have several friends that have adopted kids out of the foster system, and to see the ear-to-ear grin come across those kids' face when they're adopted into what they call a "forever family" will bring tears to your eyes. This is a picture of what it means to be adopted into God's family. God doesn't renege on adoptions. If God adopted you, you're in for good. No amount of struggle or screw-ups in your endeavor to follow Jesus is going to change that reality about you. **If your deepest heart's desire is to love God and make much of him—but you are concerned that your moments of struggle somehow nullify that—you can rest assured knowing that that's not how adoption works.** No, you are now one of his *sons*.

Now just in case you hear Paul use only the word "sons" and think it seems a little sexist—the crazy thing is that to Paul's audience, it was actually the exact opposite. In Paul's culture, only *sons* had the right to lay claim to an inheritance. Daughters hardly ever did. So **when Paul writes to a church made up of men and women and says that they all are adopted as sons, he's actually subversively claiming that in God's kingdom, everyone is included. He's saying that in God's family, women and men are both heirs to everything on offer.** The statement Paul makes is actually radically inclusive—that *all of us* are included in God's family.

Okay, let's keep moving, v. 7:

*[7] In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, [8] which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight.*

So the next set of blessings Paul mentions is that we have "redemption through his blood," and "the forgiveness of our trespasses." Redemption, together with forgiveness. The word "redemption" simply means to "buy back, or buy out of." If you have ever had your car towed, you then go and "redeem" your car out of captivity. And nine times out of ten, when you read the word "redemption" in the bible, it's trying to make you think of the story of the Exodus. The time when God "redeemed" his people out of their slavery in Egypt. That's what Paul wants his audience to think of.

And so **the implication here obviously is that you and I are in need of our own type of redemption.** That our sin has put us in a place that we do not want to be. One theologian has said that "sin always takes you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay." For some of us, we know *exactly* what that feels like, we've experienced it first-hand. Others of us maybe don't realize we're there, but we are. But the point Paul is making in this passage is that on our own, we all end up there and we all need to be redeemed out of it. We need someone to come and purchase us out of it. I think of a friend of mine who smoked so much weed in college that he now has to get high just to be able to function in everyday life. I think of countless people I know who are addicted to pornography, to the point that they cannot go 24 hours without looking at it. I think of myself in high school and college and still often today, when I am enslaved to people's approval of me. When I do so much of what I do because I want people to see me a certain way as a result. **People in those scenarios don't just need some slight behavior modification. We're in need of redemption.** We need someone to come and purchase us out.

And the way that happens is through what Paul mentions next—"the forgiveness of our trespasses." For *redemption* to happen we need our sins *forgiven*. Whenever a wrong of any kind occurs, there is always a debt that must be paid. We usually explain it like this: imagine that you come over to my house and you break one my beautiful, look-nicer-than-they-are, Ikea lamps. There is a *debt* generated when that happens. Because of that debt, either 1) *you* have to pay for the lamp, or 2) *I* have to pay for the lamp. Now maybe you're going "no, because you can also just tell me not to worry about it." Well, first off, that's a very presumptuous thing for a lamp-breaker to say. But second, you're right, I can do that—but all that means is that I have *absorbed* the debt into myself. If I tell you not to worry about it, I am effectively one Ikea lamp poorer than I was before you waltzed into my house and started breaking stuff. It's not that there isn't a debt, it's just that that debt got *forgiven*.

*True* forgiveness *always* comes at a cost to the one forgiving. **To forgive someone means you are absorbing the debt that another person created.** That's what forgiveness *is*. And so what Scripture says that Jesus accomplished in the cross is that he *forgave* us. That doesn't mean he just said shrugged it off. No—it means he *absorbed* the debt that all of us created *into* himself. **We get forgiveness and redemption because of what Jesus volunteered to absorb.** And that's what Paul is alluding to here. And it wasn't just a theoretical cost—it was a physical one. That we received redemption and forgiveness "*through his blood.*" To redeem and forgive us, Jesus shed his very blood. That's what was accomplished for us on the cross.

**But what Jesus did on the cross doesn't just stop there—it gets better.** Look at what Paul says all that *leads to*, v. 9:

*[9] making known to us the **mystery of his will**, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ [10] as a plan for the fullness of time, to **unite all things in him**, things in heaven and things on earth.*

So Paul says that **what Jesus has done for us isn't just for our sake. It's not just for personal assurance.** It doesn't terminate on us. It actually has a bigger, fuller purpose than that. Paul says that in doing that, God "makes known to us the mystery of his will"—he reveals to us his blueprint for the entire world. Which Paul says is ultimately "to unite all things in Jesus." Now I'm not going to spend very much time on this since we unpacked it some last week. But the basic idea is that **through God choosing us, adopting us, redeeming us, forgiving us—he is also enlisting us in the plan that he has for all creation—to "unite all things in Christ."** To put things in the world back together. So what God is doing in the world is way bigger than just giving some people a ticket to heaven. That's just one aspect of it. **The purpose in what God has done for us is to make us a part of putting things in this world back together.** We are now a central piece now of that plan.

So for me, growing up in church, I knew that the main thing people at the church wanted me to do was what they called "accepting Jesus." There were all these altar calls, and all these events, and all these lock-ins (anybody remember lock-ins?) and all these out-of-town retreats, and they were all aimed at getting me, and other people like me, to "accept Jesus." Once we did, we would say a prayer, we would get baptized—which a friend of mine in church referred to as "temporary drowning on purpose"—and that was it. Then we were good. And at least to me, it didn't feel like there was really a whole lot of instruction as to what we should do *after* we accepted Jesus. Like there was a vague sense that we were to keep coming to church, and that we were to sometimes bring other people with us so that maybe they could

“accept Jesus” too. But it felt like the whole thing was sort of engineered around just getting people to experience that one thing. But according to this passage in Ephesians, God’s grand plan is not just to get people to “accept Jesus.” He wants that, it’s an absolutely necessary part of the whole thing, it’s a required starting point—but it’s not the end goal. It’s the *beginning*. **By choosing and adopting and redeeming and forgiving people, God is actually incorporating them into his plan to “unite all things” in all of creation. To put things in the world back together.**

Like I said, much more about that in last week’s teaching, and in the rest of this series. For today, let’s get to where Paul begins to wrap all of this up, v. 11:

*[11] In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, [12] so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.*

**So these two verses in some ways serve as a summary of most of the things Paul has been saying in this passage.** (Which means, just as an interesting little aside, Paul is now summarizing his run-on sentence *while he is still in his run-on sentence*. If you are an English teacher, you’re dying on the inside right now). But he summarizes—he references back to many of the things he’s said so far—the idea of being “predestined,” to God having a big, overarching “purpose” in all of this, to how God is working together “all things” according to his will, back to how all of this is “to the praise of his glory.” Those are all things that Paul has already said, and now he’s now starting tying them all back together.

But as he does that—just to make things interesting—he also introduces a *new* term into the mix. You know, because if there was one thing this sentence was lacking, it was theological concepts. But he introduces a new word, and it’s the word *inheritance*. So this is a word we’re actually pretty familiar to us: and inheritance is something of value passed on to you by a family member. If we are adopted, brought into God’s family as sons, that means we are now also heirs to an inheritance. So the question becomes *what is the inheritance?* What exactly is it that God has given us? The number one question anybody wants to know upon hearing they are getting an inheritance is what? *What is it.* Or if we were completely honest, *how much is it.* Well honestly it could be referring to any number of things. But I think the most likely option is that it’s the *result* of what Paul just mentioned—God’s plan to put things back together. And if you think about it, this makes sense. **Usually, what you’re getting in an inheritance is the end result of everything that person spent their life working towards.** So it would make sense that in the inheritance we get from God, we would get the end result of everything he has spent all of *eternity* working towards.

This is what the bible usually calls “the new heavens and the new earth.” It teaches that one day, everything we hate and grieve about this present world will be undone. Everything around us will be returned to what God had in mind from the beginning. And **the promise is that all of us who follow Jesus, all of us who are “in him” as this passage says, will inherit that world as our own.** I think of the sermon on the mount, where Jesus says “blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the *earth*.” I think of the book of Revelation where it says that when all of that happens, God will dwell with us and we will “reign” with him. **This could be called the inheritance that we have coming to us—the new heavens and the new earth. The world we inhabit now, but once it is renewed into what it was supposed to be all along.** We as God’s people get *that*.

And in a larger sense, it refers to that day in the future when we fully realize everything Paul has mentioned in this passage. The day when being chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven—when we experience those perfectly and permanently.

“But”, you might be asking, “what about now?” “That’s great for future me—what about present me? What about the version of me that struggles to know if I’m chosen, struggles to grasp that I’m redeemed, on a regular basis?” Well in these last two verses **Paul is going to tell us how we can know now that we possess all of those things**. He’s going to tell us how we can know those things are true of us and begin to experience them now. So look at what he says, v. 13...

*[13] In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were **sealed** with the promised Holy Spirit, [14] who is the **guarantee** of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.*

So the way we know we will inherit all of that is that we are “sealed” with the Holy Spirit, who is a “guarantee” of our inheritance. That imagery of being sealed is a little lost on us today, but in Paul’s day the way a king or ruler would validate a letter or package he sent was by “sealing” it. There would be wax on the outside of the thing he was sending, and the king would take his ring, that had a particular engraving on it, and he would press that ring into the wax. So if you received something with that seal on it, you would know that the king himself verified what was in it. Sort of like a more legit version of a person’s signature today. And then a guarantee was what you and I would call a “down payment”—a financial guarantee that the person you interacted with was good for the transaction. Paul uses these two images—a seal and a guarantee—as a ways of describing how God *assures* us of everything that we receive through Jesus. God ensures it all it *by giving us the Holy Spirit*.

Now, we only have about five minutes left in the sermon, which is nowhere *near* enough time to unpack a topic as complex and controversial as the Holy Spirit. So here’s the plan: God-willing, sometime next spring, we are going to do an entire teaching series where we talk in detail about who the Holy Spirit is and what he does. I’m really pumped about that. But for now, let’s just hit on real briefly what Paul has in mind *here*. What he’s saying is that **the Holy Spirit guarantees God’s inheritance for us**. Put another way, **one day in the future Jesus will be *physically* present with us, and we know that because currently he is *spiritually* present with us. One day we will be with God, but for now he is with us**. By giving us the Holy Spirit, God is telling us that we can *count on* our future inheritance.

It’s sort of like this. So once or twice a year, either my parents or Ana’s parents will offer to watch our son Whit for a few days so Ana and I can go on a little getaway. They’ll pick him up, let him stay at their house, and we’ll go enjoy a kid-free weekend where we mostly just go to bed early and sleep late in the mornings—we’re pretty boring people actually. And every time we drop him off, we’re so excited to get some time to ourselves. But then usually, after about 24 hours passes, we’re sitting at a restaurants scrolling through pictures and videos of Whit on our phone because of how bad we miss him. We’ll start telling our parents to send us all the pictures and videos they can, because we want to feel like he’s with us. And we get so much joy from those pictures and videos, because it helps us experience some of the joy of being with Whit, even though he’s not physically present with us. In a way, that’s how Paul is describing the role of the Holy Spirit. You and I, this side of eternity, don’t get to experience the fullness of where God is taking things in the world. And the realities of these blessings we’ve been given often

escape us. But we *have* been given the Holy Spirit, who is a constant reminder of all that, “*until we acquire possession of it.*” Until it’s there finally and tangibly for good. Does that make sense?

So think about this: for followers of Jesus in the room, when you’re tempted to buy that thing that you really don’t need to buy, because you think it will somehow make your life more full, more satisfying—and you sense the Spirit speaking to you “you don’t need that, and you have something far better than that in store for you,” that’s a guarantee of your inheritance until you gain possession of it. When you are tempted to nurse that grudge, to hold that one thing against that person who hurt you or wronged you—and you sense the Holy Spirit telling you to forgive, to reconcile— that’s a guarantee of your inheritance until you gain possession of it. And when you’ve gone through the most devastating loss that you’ve ever experienced, and it just seems like all the things you love are being ripped away from you—and in the midst of it all through the deepest possible pain you hear the Holy Spirit say to you, “you are not alone. You are loved.” That is the guarantee of your inheritance until you gain possession of it. That’s the type of thing Paul is talking about.

**A central piece of following Jesus is learning how to live with competing realities about ourselves.** On the one hand, I’m a *mess*. I struggle often with self-centeredness, selfishness, hard-heartedness, impatience. On the other hand, I am a part of God’s chosen people, chosen to be holy and blameless in his sight. On the one hand, I often feel enslaved to my desires, to my performance, to my self-righteousness and condescension towards other people—and to any number of other things. But on the other hand, I have been redeemed—purchased out of that slavery by the blood of Jesus himself. And so **following Jesus is all about me learning to live in the better of those two realities, while dealing with the presence of the other one. It is us trying to learn how to live in light of what we’ve been given, while coming face-to-face with what we are.** That in many ways, is the essence of following Jesus.

Now, I know today has been light on application and we’re out of time. But that’s okay—applying what we talked about today is what the rest of this book is going to help us to do. But for today, **can we just end by asking the Holy Spirit to help us realize these incredible truths about ourselves? That we are chosen. Adopted. Redeemed. Forgiven. Included in God’s plan to put things back together. Given an inheritance. And sealed with the Holy Spirit.** And that all of this is ours through what Jesus has done for us.

Let’s pray to that end.