

Introduction:

- A. Two years ago this summer we visited the ruins of ancient Ephesus, on the west coast of Turkey. I looked at the pictures again this week and tried to imagine that city in its prime, when the Apostle Paul wrote to the church there. I imagined of the wide **streets**, bordered by marble pillars, filled with busy people. Streets filled with shops and craftsmen—all driven to earn a buck just like we do today. **Temples**—shrines to empty hearts. **Wealthy homes**—hiding lust and bickering and problem kids behind beautiful walls just like a lot of homes today. Ephesus was eventually home to one of the greatest **libraries** in the world, but they knew little of the Living Word. And that great **arena** with 25,000 seats, a monument to a culture obsessed with entertainment, often violent. Not so different than where we live. There were **Christians** who lived there. Christians who tried to keep their balance in that culture like we do in ours. **If you live in Ephesus—or Chicago--as a believer, you must learn what it means to live “in Christ.”**
- B. Turn to the letter to the Ephesians. Right from the greeting, believers are reminded that we are *not* like everyone else in our community. **Vv.1-2...** Then, after these lofty greetings, Paul launches. Alexander Maclaren wrote, *“Put a pen into his hand, and it is like tapping a blast furnace; and out rushes a fiery stream at white heat.”* In Greek, vv.3-14 is one long sentence of over 200 words. Clauses elbowing one another for attention. (*I modify that! No, I that’s my line.*) Phrases piling on top of each other like excited fans of Jesus. Remember diagramming sentences? This one would break your heart! It will take us three weeks to get through these verses, so let’s get started. The first half of this letter—three chapters—could be seen as Paul’s expansion of the first sentence: **v.3...**

I. GOD HAS BLESSED US WITH EVERY SPIRITUAL BLESSING IN CHRIST (1:3)

This sentence actually has the word ‘bless’ three times: *Bless God who has blessed us...with every spiritual blessing...* We bless God with our words—we praise him; God blesses us with his gifts, what he does for us. Let’s break this verse down:

- A. “Every spiritual blessing”. What are “spiritual blessings”? Illus.: Have you ever sat around the tree on Christmas and you open a gift and it says, *“A gift of \$25 has been made in your name to the Acme Homeless Shelter.”* “O wow!” you say, feigning selfless gratitude. But inside you’re thinking (well, I’m thinking), *“Bummer! So I don’t really get anything??”* I wonder if some dark place in us doesn’t respond to this promise the same half-hearted way: *“Great. Spiritual blessings. I love those.”* But you were hoping for a gift card from Best Buy. Actually, this is better than we realize! Spiritual blessings are benefits—gifts—given by the Holy Spirit to nourish and enrich our spirits—our real person, our souls. In a moment, when we begin to go through them, you’ll see how really wonderful they are.
- B. “In the heavenly realms”, or *“in the heavenlies.”* That phrase is used five times in Ephesians and nowhere else. Look at **2:6**: *“God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.* One of the Christian mysteries is that even though we live here in this place, we really are also in another place—*“heavenly realms”*, because not only does Jesus live in us, we also live *in Jesus*, and Jesus is in heaven. We live where the Lord reigns, where angels traffic, where all is set right. It means that **even though we’re here we live out of the life and resources of our true home there.** That is where we’re nourished. That is where we rest. That is where our relationships are deepest and are everlasting. That is where we turn for help, joy, peace, grace and all else that shapes us into Christlike people in this world. Finally...
- C. God *“blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing **in Christ.**”* “In Christ.” We will come upon this little phrase often. Romans says, *“in Adam all sinned.”* Every descendant of Adam was infected with Adam’s sinfulness because we were *in him* when he sinned. His spiritual genes mutated, you might say, and that sin-infected mutation passed on to every single descendant of Adam. In a similar way, by trusting Jesus for salvation, we are now *“in Christ.”* All that Jesus has, all that he is,

flows to us as his spiritual descendants. We have his spiritual genes, his nature, because we have his Spirit within us. We have “every spiritual blessing” because Jesus has “every spiritual blessing.” They’re in our blood, you might say. They are our born-again birthright. People talk about how **spiritually** refreshing it is, say, to go for a walk in the woods (and it is), but for a lot of people, that’s as close to God as they ever get because they don’t have Jesus. Jesus wraps his people in spiritual blessings, he infuses us with spiritual blessings, his every whisper to us is a spiritual blessing! That’s why it is so wonderful to belong to Jesus!

- D. Well, what are these spiritual blessings? In this long, strung-on sentence that runs through v.14, there are five that are spelled out. So let’s look at them. **V.4...**

II. SPIRITUAL BLESSING #1: GOD CHOSE US TO BE HOLY AND BLAMELESS IN HIS SIGHT (1:4)

- A. God chose us to be holy and blameless before the creation of the world. Talking about God’s sovereign choice, election, and predestination makes us nervous. It’s the church equivalent of bringing up, say, Dick Cheney at the coffee shop. Are you *sure* you want to go there?? It’s because we try to balance this idea of God’s sovereign decrees with human free will and responsibility. But there’s no doubt that the Bible speaks very clearly about predestination, and what’s more, it is a wonderful truth.

Illus.: I always think of a story I heard about the great preacher of a 100 years ago, **Charles Haddon Spurgeon**, a devout Calvinist who believed strongly in God’s sovereign election, who was asked to preach to a congregation of Methodists, ardent Arminians all, equally devoted advocates of man’s free will. Spurgeon reported later that he was preaching “with unusual force and vigor” and the Methodists were vocal and enthusiastic, “crying, ‘Amen! Hallelujah! Glory to God!’... So I said, this brings me to the doctrine of Election. There was a deep drawing of breath. ‘Now, my friends, you believe it.’

They seemed to say, ‘No, we don’t!’

But you do, and I will make you sing ‘Hallelujah’ over it... So I put it thus: Is there no difference between you and other men?

‘Yes, yes, glory be to God!’

There is a difference between what you were and what you are now?

‘O yes, yes!’

There is sitting by your side a man who has been to the same chapel as you have, heard the same gospel; he is unconverted, and you are converted. What has made the difference, yourself or God?

‘The Lord,’ said they, ‘the Lord! Glory! Hallelujah!’

Yes, cried I, and that is the doctrine of Election; that is all I contend for, that if there be a difference, the Lord made the difference.”

If God sees you now wrapped in Christ’s righteousness, if you are becoming holy in your walk, if you expect to stand holy and blameless before God on that great day, it is because—and *only* because—God **chose** you to be holy and blameless in his sight before the creation of the world.

- B. We might rightly ask, “Why me?” Do you see the last two words of **v.4**, “*in love*”? Given Paul’s run-on sentence it isn’t clear those words go with the phrase before or the phrase after. But in either case, the reason God chose us and predestined us was *love*. He didn’t look ahead through the ages and choose the person he could see who would be most loveable, or most responsive. There wasn’t anything in us that caught the attention of his love. For reasons he never explains, he just decided to love us—even before he created the world!

Being holy and blameless is not a burden imposed on us by a stern and demanding God. It is a gift and high calling given to helpless sinners by the God who fixed his love on us even before he said, “Let there be light.”

- C. Again we have “in him”—“He chose us in him [Christ]... to be holy and blameless.” God would have to wrap us in Christ’s righteousness to see us as blameless and holy. He wrapped us in Christ’s nature and

name. We died with Christ and rose with him, and so, thanks to Jesus our holy vehicle, we are dead to sin and alive forever.

- D. You will never hear this in the world, but there is nothing that would ennoble and exalt a human being so much as to be holy and blameless. This is what we were created for. This is a woman or man truly in the image of God. Imagine a person stripped of all selfishness, of all the stains and scars on one's mind and heart that come from our sin or someone else's; a person who's will to do what is right and loving is unerringly steadfast, a person whose dignity has never been sullied by one unloving thought, one harsh response; a person whose whole focus of life is selfless loving service. That is what God saw for you and me. He is crafting us right now toward that end, and that is what we shall fully be when we see the Lord with our own eyes. As Paul wrote in **Phil. 1:6**, "*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*"
- E. So, to steal a phrase, be all that you can be! This first of the "spiritual blessings" means that God has given you all you need for godly living. When are you *not* holy and blameless. That is not who you are meant to be. Oh, I know the pull of the old sinful self is terribly strong, but you don't have to sin; you don't have to fail. Stop sinning, draw on God's power, love and wisdom, and do what is right. **Holiness is your new normal!**

III. SPIRITUAL BLESSING #2: GOD ADOPTED US (1:5-6)

- A. It would have been wonderful if God just rescued us from death, but it wasn't enough for God. He wanted to adopt us; to make us his own beloved sons and daughters. That is why he had to find a way to make us holy and blameless. Unholy rebels would never be at home with God!
- Illus.: About 3 weeks ago we got a rather amazing email from my wife's youngest brother Jon. Six or seven years ago, when Jon and Lori were working with a youth group in Nebraska, they met Amanda—a teenage girl the same age as their son Wesley. Amanda came from a terribly abusive home and was eventually taken from her parents by the state. She's been part of Jon and Lori's family ever since. So three weeks ago, after conferring with their two sons, Jon and Lori legally adopted Amanda. She's 22. And her name is now Amanda Foote. She will get a **new birth certificate!** Now Jon and Lori have **three legal heirs**, and Amanda has **two new brothers**. She no longer has any **legal claim** upon her former parents—who disowned her—nor they upon her. The process was pretty simple, and they had thought of Amanda as their daughter for a long time, but I asked if anything felt different after that day at the courthouse. Jon said, "*Absolutely! When it was official there was a huge change in Lori and I—sort of like when you see your newborn for the first time. And for Amanda, there was a change in her, too. Now she knew she belonged. She knew we were her parents.*"
- Thanks to the way-clearing of our Elder Brother Jesus, God's Beloved Son, God has given us a new name (his), new legal standing (we are his responsibility and his heirs), and a new family (brothers and sisters in Christ, and God as our true Father). But God gave us something Jon and Lori can't give Amanda. God gave us his Holy Spirit. It's like God gives us his DNA, but more than that. God implanted in us his heart, his mind, his passion, his holiness. So people can say, "*My, she bears a striking resemblance to her Father!*"
- B. Why did God do this? "In accordance with his pleasure and will." It was what he most wanted to do, and what delighted him. Here's the really astonishing thing: God is undoubtedly more delighted to have you as his adopted son or daughter, than even you are to be adopted.
- C. V.6 says, "*to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.*" There's the "*in Christ*" again—"*in the One he loves.*" All these spiritual blessings he has given us were unmerited, unsought, and under-appreciated. But yet he gave. And that's why we praise him again and again.
- D. So why is this spiritual blessing better than a gift card? Because we now have a Father who loves us more passionately and with greater delight than any earthly father. He delights in our company, our

confidence in him, our dependence and rest. He loves to see his sons and daughters together, loving one another. We belong. We have a name, a legacy, a family and a new nature. Be a credit to your Father's name. Let's strive to make him proud.

Conclusion

This passage begins telling us to praise God—praise him for giving us every spiritual blessing in Christ. So let us do that this week, every chance we get. Let us look for ways to connect our daily experience to these first two great spiritual blessings—that God chose us to be holy and blameless in his sight, and that he has adopted us as his own sons and daughters.

My favorite old book teacher, Dr. Maclaren, emphasized in a sermon on this passage how these spiritual blessings are in the heavenly realms, and that we must seek the things we need most for our spiritual lives in the presence of God where we are seated “in Christ.” He said, “*in order to get the gift we must go up.*” We have to go into the presence of the Lord through our prayers and faith, to lay hold of our blessings of holiness and adoption. He said that the Mass used to begin with a Latin phrase, ‘*Sursum corda*’—up with your hearts!

I like that. Even if we live in a worldly city like Ephesus or Chicago, we must remember that we are really “*in Christ in heavenly realms.*” ‘*Sursum corda*’—**Up with your hearts!**