Rejoice

God chose to provide the blessings of salvation through Jesus’ sacrifice.

Both of my parents were devout Christians. I recall from my earliest boyhood memories that we were fully involved in church life as a family. And I loved it. Church was a regular part of life’s rhythm for us. To this day, I cannot imagine my family not gathering together with other Christian families each week to worship the Lord and study the Scriptures.

One aspect of corporate worship that I enjoyed a lot as a boy was congregational singing. As soon as I learned to read, Mom let me hold a hymnal for myself. She opened it to the right song number and pointed with her finger until I learned how to follow the stanzas. It was a great day when I no longer needed her help to join along in singing “Count Your Blessings”—one of my favorite congregational hymns.

In worship, I did my best in a childlike way to thank God for my many blessings. I would bring to mind my family, our house, and our adequate supply of food and clothes. Then I thought about the blessings of church and school. I was also grateful for Jesus, and I offered Him thanks as the source of all my blessings.

I think the apostle Paul might have enjoyed singing this great hymn about counting one’s blessings. I think this because Paul emphasized God’s blessings to believers so vividly in the opening chapter of Ephesians. As we delve into the study of Ephesians 1:3-14 in this session, Paul’s words will lead us to rejoice over the great spiritual blessings we receive from Christ in salvation. Let’s be sure to count those blessings and name them one by one!

Understand the Context

Ephesians 1:1-14

Most of Paul’s New Testament epistles follow a typical letter-writing format of the first century, consisting of four parts: an opening salutation, a word
of thanksgiving, the main body, and a closing salutation or list of greetings. In his opening salutation to Ephesians (1:1-2), Paul identified himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will” (1:1). Establishing his apostolic role and authority would lay an important foundation for calling on the recipients to accept his teachings in the main body of the letter. Next, he identified the recipients as “the faithful saints in Christ Jesus at Ephesus” (1:1). As mentioned in the book introduction, some of the earliest New Testament manuscripts do not have the words “at Ephesus” in this verse. While this fact might suggest the epistle was originally meant to be circulated among several churches in the region, the Ephesian congregation no doubt would have been the foremost among them. Finally, Paul expressed a prayer-wish for the recipients of “grace to you and peace from God ... and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:2). The phrase “grace and peace” was a common salutation in the Greco-Roman world, but Paul used it with an intentional Christian meaning.

After the opening salutation, Paul launched into an extended message of thanksgiving or blessing (1:3-23). This session focuses only on the first segment of the thanksgiving, verses 3-14. This segment is often described as a doxology in which Paul’s gratitude is centered on God and expressed in words of praise to Him. As such, the doxology serves as an act of worship in which both Paul and his readers participate. From a literary perspective, the doxology is unusual in that verses 3-14 comprise one long, complex sentence in the Greek text. English Bible translations tend to organize the verses into several sentences for ease of reading, but readers should keep in mind that the doxology was a literary diamond with many multicolored facets, all of which fit together seamlessly into one magnificent hymn of praise.

Four themes can be identified that form the doxology’s framework:

• The Trinity, or Triune Godhead. From his Judaistic conviction that God is One, Paul had come to understand that the one God existed in three Persons—the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Paul expressed the doxology in verses 3-14 in that conviction. Indeed, one outline of the doxology proceeds in this manner: the Father has blessed us (1:3); the Son has blessed us (1:4-12); and the Spirit has blessed us (1:13-14).

• The centrality of Jesus Christ. The bulk of the doxology focuses on who Christ is and what He has accomplished on behalf of believers—whether Jews or Gentiles.

• God’s eternal plan of salvation throughout past, present, and future. Salvation from sin through faith in Christ was God’s plan “before the foundation of the world” (1:4), “for the right time” (1:10), and “until the redemption of the possession” (1:14) in the future.

• Important theological terms and concepts. Paul expected his recipients to grasp the essential meaning of terms such as predestination, redemption,
adoption, and salvation. We will do well as believers in the twenty-first century to understand these terms and concepts as well.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

CHOSEN (Eph. 1:3-6)

Paul began his doxology with a statement that believers have received God’s wonderful blessings. One of these blessings is being chosen by the heavenly Father to be adopted as His spiritual children.

VERSE 3

Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ.

When people say they have been blessed, they often mean they have received a good thing (or things) from someone for which they are glad. The Scriptures emphasize, however, that true blessings ultimately come from God. Interestingly, Paul began his thanksgiving doxology by declaring that God also is blessed. But how can this be if God is the source of blessings? The answer to this question likely is to be resolved by recognizing that in the case of God, the phrase blessed is can also be understood as “praise be to [God]” (see NIV). The Greek term rendered blessed literally means “to be well spoken of” and is the basis of our English word eulogy. In the sense that we as believers can bless God, we do so by praising Him—by saying true and wonderful things about Him.

Paul began his doxology of praise by calling attention to God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul was calling on believers from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds to confess and praise God’s true nature. Jewish believers needed to acknowledge that the one true God existed in three Persons—Father, Son, and Spirit. Gentile believers needed to affirm that the three Persons of the Godhead are not separate, multiple gods as they had believed in their pagan backgrounds but are indeed one, and only one, true and living God.

Paul praised the Son by intentionally describing Him as the Lord Jesus Christ. The title Lord emphasized the Son’s deity and sovereignty. The name Jesus, while emphasizing the Son’s humanity, also called to mind His mission as the Savior. The Greek name Jesus is a form of the Hebrew name Joshua, meaning “the Lord saves.” The title Christ is the Greek form of the Hebrew word Messiah, a reference to the divinely anointed Deliverer who was promised through the Old Testament prophets (see Dan. 9:24-27).
Paul explained that it is **in Christ**—that is, by being saved through faith in Him—that God blesses believers with **every spiritual blessing**. Paul likely was emphasizing at this point the blessings of salvation (which he detailed in Eph. 1:4-14), not material blessings such as houses, lands, or possessions. Further, he located these spiritual blessings **in the heavens** (“in heavenly places,” KJV; “in the heavenly realms,” NIV). This turn of phrase, found only in Ephesians and perhaps coined by Paul, may be a reference to God’s sphere of divine reality. At the least it points to God as the source of our best and most important blessings.

**VERSE 4**

**For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him.**

The first spiritual blessing Paul mentioned in his doxology is that God **chose believers in Christ before the foundation of the world.** God’s plan to create a faithful, holy, redeemed people through the Son was in God’s mind even prior to the creation of the world as described in Genesis 1–2. Paul’s emphasis in Ephesians 1:4 was on God’s sovereignty and initiative. The letter’s recipients who were Jewish Christians would have understood and affirmed the concept of God’s sovereign election, for the Old Testament Scriptures overflow with references to the Israelites as God’s chosen people (see Deut. 7:6-8).

The phrase **to be holy and blameless** is best understood not as a basis of but rather a result of God’s choice. That is, God did not choose as His people those who already were **holy and blameless**. Rather, He determined beforehand that people’s believing in Christ would result in their transformation from being sinful and lost to being set apart and right with God. Apart from Christ, we are unholy, deserving only of God’s wrath. Through faith in Christ, however, we are forgiven and set free from sin’s bondage so that we can live in obedience to the one true and living God, our Creator. Thus, Paul specified that in Christ believers have been made fit to stand **before him**.

The phrase **in love** appears following, not preceding, the words **before him.** Since the oldest biblical manuscripts did not contain chapter and verse markings or formal punctuation, New Testament scholars have debated whether Paul intended the phrase **in love** to go with verse 4 (KJV; CSB) or to introduce verse 5 (ESV; NIV). If it goes with verse 4, then Paul meant that God’s plan included the believer’s holy living being energized by Christlike **love** (Greek, **agape** [ah GAH pay]). If the phrase was meant to introduce verse 5, then Paul was emphasizing that love motivated God to sovereignly choose to create a holy people for Himself through Christ.
VERSE 5

He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will,

Few theological concepts have stirred more intense debate among Christians in modern times than that of predestination. The Greek term rendered predestined is the combination of a prefix meaning “before” and a word meaning “to establish boundaries or limits.” (The term also appears in Acts 4:28; Rom. 8:29,30; 1 Cor 2:7; and Eph. 1:11.) Literally, the word rendered predestined means “marked out beforehand.” The question that believers have debated surrounding this concept is whom or what God marked out beforehand in regard to His plan of salvation. At the same time, most evangelical Christians agree on these crucial points: (1) God sovereignly took the initiative in providing the one and only way of salvation for sinners in Christ; (2) All human beings are sinners and can receive salvation only by trusting in Jesus Christ; and (3) All who genuinely believe in Christ become part of God’s redeemed people now and forever.

The third area of agreement points to Paul’s emphasis in Ephesians 1:5 that the divine choice marked out beforehand included believers’ being adopted as sons through Jesus Christ. Adoption is a wonderful aspect of salvation. Both Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:5-6 emphasize the resulting relationship believers have with God, a relationship by which they receive the right to call Him Abba, an Aramaic term of familial affection similar to the English term Daddy. Jesus used Abba to plead with the heavenly Father in His prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36).

Thus, not only do we as believers enjoy the blessing of being graciously chosen by God in Christ, we also are adopted into His family. His plan was to accomplish this through Jesus Christ, His eternal Son. Further, God’s plan for a family consisting of children from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9) was based on what He joyfully desired; it was a matter of the good pleasure of his will. This is what pleased God, so He decided it.

VERSE 6

to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One.

God’s glorious grace is on full display in His purpose. Spiritual blessings are ultimately not for our praise but God’s. Believers who have received God’s grace, His unmerited favor, will be praising Him eternally. Further, Paul exclaimed that God’s display of grace in saving sinners was not stingy but lavish. In union with Christ, whom God loves perfectly and eternally, believers receive all of these amazing blessings.
Paul’s attention moved from the Father’s sovereign initiative in eternity past to the Son’s work on the cross in human history to secure salvation. Our redemption through Christ grants us the blessings of forgiveness, spiritual enlightenment, and an eternal inheritance.

VERSE 7

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace

Sinners are made fit to belong to God’s family only by redemption through Christ’s shed blood. People in Paul’s day knew about the practice of being redeemed from a life of slavery. Gaining one’s freedom was not easy; neither was it cheap. Redemption usually came through the payment of a costly price—a price that slaves usually could not pay for themselves.

For believers of Jewish heritage, redemption also brought to mind the Israelites’ exodus from Egyptian slavery (Ex. 15:13; Deut. 7:8) and the dramatic annual remembrance of that event in the Passover festival. In the Passover ritual, the sacrifice of an unblemished animal as a sin offering foreshadowed Jesus’ atoning death on the cross as the sinless Lamb of God who “purchased people for God” by His shed blood (Rev. 5:9). Paul’s reference to Christ’s blood was his way of summarizing everything that Christ accomplished in His suffering and violent death on the cross.

From what did Christ’s death set us free as believers? Paul focused on our bondage to sin. Sin was an unbearably heavy debt that we could neither repay nor escape. Jesus Christ freely gave Himself to die—taking the consequences of our sin for us—so that those who trust in His provision gain the forgiveness of our trespasses. The term rendered trespasses (“sins,” KJV; NIV) refers to stepping across (hence, trespassing) God’s moral boundary lines. This is one of several New Testament words for sin, looked at from a variety of angles.
The spiritual blessings of redemption and forgiveness come to believers as a result of God’s wonderful grace. Paul was rightly overwhelmed by God’s generosity—as we all should be. He pointed out that these blessings are based in God’s riches. There is no shortage of undeserved favor with God!

VERSE 8

do he richly poured out on us with all wisdom and understanding.

Paul previously noted God’s overflowing grace in providing for the believer’s adoption as a child of God (Eph. 1:6). Here Paul echoed that theme, emphasizing God’s overflowing grace that he richly poured out on the believer in providing redemption and forgiveness. Further, God has given Christians the spiritual enlightenment they need to continue the journey of living as His redeemed people. He has bestowed on believers the wisdom and understanding they need. This bestowal does not come as a one-time, supernatural knowledge dump. Rather, the gifts of wisdom and understanding come as believers grow spiritually in the life of holiness. As Christians mature in faith, the Spirit increasingly gives us the ability to understand God’s ways and to apply His truth wisely in everyday situations.

VERSE 9

He made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he purposed in Christ

Paul next considered an aspect of divine wisdom that God had not previously revealed fully through the Old Testament prophets or through Scripture. Paul referred to this fresh revelation from God as the mystery of his will. The apostle used the term rendered mystery six times in Ephesians (1:9; 3:3,4,9; 5:32; 6:19). That which formerly was veiled and hidden—God’s plan for saving sinners—was now an open secret. God had revealed it according to his good pleasure that he purposed in Christ. Paul was building up to a big reveal for the recipients of his letter, a reveal that comes in the next verse.

VERSE 10

as a plan for the right time—to bring everything together in Christ, both things in heaven and things on earth in him.

God’s previously undisclosed plan would not be unveiled fully until the right time (“the fullness of time,” ESV; “when the times reach their fulfillment,” NIV). In other words, God was (and is) steering human history toward
a grand goal. Time is neither random nor circular. God’s wonderful goal will be fully accomplished at a time Paul could not specify but could declare with certainty would result in bringing **everything together in Christ, both things in heaven and things on earth**.

God’s plan of redemption is for the creation to one day be restored as a new heaven and earth in right relationship with its Creator and in harmony with one another. This restoration and harmony can only happen _in Christ_—that is, by being united to Him in faith and submitting to His lordship. The Greek verb rendered _bring ... together_ was a mathematical term that describes finding the sum of a column of numbers. As believers, we might not understand why things happen in life as they do. Some things might not add up to our expectations. One day, however, we will recognize that in Christ life adds up for our good and His glory just as God intended.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Redeem, Redemption, Redeemer” on page 1339 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does understanding redemption in its Old Testament setting enrich our understanding of salvation in Christ? What is the connection for you between being redeemed and the forgiveness of your sins?

**VERSE 11**

_In him we have also received an inheritance, because we were predestined according to the plan of the one who works out everything in agreement with the purpose of his will,_

As Paul reflected on the glorious future when all things will be summed up in Christ, he thought of the future of believers in particular. We have already received an inheritance that is not yet fully realized. As God’s children through faith in Christ, we will one day come into full understanding of the joys of eternity.

Just as God decided before the world began that believers would become holy and blameless in Christ (1:4), even so He predestined their receiving an inheritance. Paul emphasized again that God was (and is) working out His plan centered in Christ. He actively works out everything so that His plan most assuredly will be accomplished. The apostle was not denying the reality of evil or the role of human responsibility. Rather, he was stressing that God cannot be stopped from bringing about the ultimate purpose of his will.
VERSE 12

so that we who had already put our hope in Christ might bring praise to his glory.

The Gospels are clear that Jesus’ earthly ministry was focused primarily on the Jews (see Matt. 15:24). Just as clear, however, is the fact that the risen Christ commissioned His followers to make disciples of all people groups, Jews and Gentiles (Matt. 28:19). Thus, it was neither snobbery nor boasting that Paul referred to the first (Jewish) Christians as we who had already put our hope in Christ. The Greek verb rendered had already put ... hope can also mean “to be the first to hope.”

Why had God sent prophecies about the coming of the Messiah to the people of Israel? Why had some Jewish people put their hope in Jesus? It was so that His people might bring praise to his glory (see Eph. 1:6). God chose Abraham and worked out His plan for the people of Israel so that the world could recognize God’s great glory when His people praised Him (Isa. 43:21).

EXPLORE FURTHER

God’s glory refers to His fame or splendor on display for His creatures to recognize and honor (see Eph. 1:6,12,14,17,18; 3:16,21.) His glory is displayed in believers as a result of the transformation He accomplishes in us (see Eph. 3:13). In what ways are you now displaying God’s glory?

SEALED (Eph. 1:13-14)

VERSE 13

In him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and when you believed.

Here Paul included Gentile Christians (you also) alongside Jewish believers as recipients of God’s blessings in salvation. These benefits began to unfold at a specific time that Paul could identify: when you heard the word of truth. Paul may have been referring to the years he spent evangelizing in Ephesus and the surrounding region (see Acts 19:8-10). When people heard the gospel message proclaimed and responded by believing in Jesus, they were at that moment sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

In Paul’s day, a seal was a visible mark of ownership and authenticity. Letters often were sealed with a wax imprint of the sender’s family crest.
Slaves often bore a brand or scar indicating who owned them. While such seals were external, God’s seal on His people is internal, of the heart. The divine seal, in fact, is God’s indwelling presence in the Person of the Holy Spirit. There is no more identifiable mark on the believer’s life than the Spirit.

By way of review, consider the following:

- In Christ, believers receive every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3).
- In Christ, believers were chosen before the world began (1:4).
- In Christ, God’s grace has been given freely (1:6).
- In Christ, believers have received redemption and forgiveness (1:7).
- In Christ, God will one day bring all things together in unity (1:10).
- In Christ, believers receive an eternal inheritance (1:11).
- In Christ, believers have hope (1:12).
- In Christ, believers are sealed with the Spirit (1:13).

VERSE 14

The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our inheritance, until the redemption of the possession, to the praise of his glory.

Paul extended his explanation of believers’ being blessed with the Spirit as a seal of our salvation. The Spirit also is the down payment of our inheritance. The Greek term rendered down payment can also be translated as “earnest” (KJV), “guarantee” (ESV), or “deposit” (NIV). In financial terms, the word described an amount put aside to secure a larger, longer-term financial transaction.

Similarly, God’s gift of His ongoing presence in believers’ lives now is merely a foretaste of what we will receive when our inheritance as God’s redeemed children is fully complete. This will occur in the future when the redemption of the possession in Christ is fulfilled. In the meantime, we await Christ’s return with full assurance and hope because we enjoy the Spirit’s indwelling presence daily. In light of that blessing, we can join with Paul in exclaiming the praise of God’s glory in our words and actions.

EXPLORE FURTHER

In the article titled “Holy Spirit” in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded, read the section labeled “The Spirit as the One Who Applies the Work of Redemption” on pages 760–761. In addition to becoming the seal and down payment of salvation, what else does the Spirit accomplish in the believer’s life? How can you avoid hindering the Holy Spirit’s work in your life?