

## WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

*Ephesians 1:1*

In 1738, John Wesley boarded a ship in the British colony of Georgia to return home to England after two years as a Christian missionary. During the long voyage home, he had plenty of time to reflect on his life. He looked back over his time at Oxford University, where he was ordained a priest in the Church of England and distinguished himself for leading a group known as ‘The Holy Club.’ These zealous young men met nightly to study the Bible and devoted themselves to good works. This was followed by arduous missionary work in the New World. With these credentials it is a surprise to read what Wesley wrote in his journal while sailing home:

It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country in order to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of Christianity; but what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why, what I least suspected, that I, who went to America to covert others, was myself never converted to God!

Wesley had come to realize that for all his religious attainments—his degrees, his associations, his morality, his works—he lacked a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Though an eminent member of the church, he was not

a Christian. Wesley began searching for true salvation, and it was not long before he found it in the gospel of God’s grace and especially in the precious blood of Christ. Wesley records with joy his coming to true and saving faith:

I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.<sup>17</sup>

Wesley’s experience is an important one for us to reflect on, because many people in the church today are in the situation he was in. They have read the Bible, they have given time, labor, and money to the cause of religion, but they have never ceased relying on their works, their supposed goodness, and as a result have never entered into the eternal life that comes through faith in Christ alone.

This matter would undoubtedly have interested the apostle Paul. I say this because of the great labor he exerts in Ephesians to describe what a Christian really is. Paul employs a great variety of descriptions in Ephesians of what it means to be a Christian. Christians are the body of Christ, the family of God, a holy nation, and a

temple in which God lives. Christians are those who are chosen in God's love, adopted as his children, and forgiven by Christ's blood. The Christian is the 'new man,' part of the new society in the new creation of Christ's resurrection life. Paul wants us to know what it means to be a Christian. He wants us to enter into the glories, the resources, and the obligations involved in a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. The first consideration must be, therefore, the definition of a Christian—and Paul provides a convenient answer to that question in the very first verse: 'To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 1:1). These words will be the focus of our attention as we answer the question, 'What is a Christian?'

#### TO THE SAINTS

Few Bible words have a sadder history than the first word Paul uses to describe a Christian: 'To the *saints*.' Most people think of saints as super-spiritual people who are far removed from the mundane affairs of normal life. How common it is to hear Christians exclaim, 'I'm not a saint, after all!' But as Paul and the Bible use the word, you cannot be a Christian unless you are a saint. Being a Christian makes you a saint by definition.

We need to consider the Roman Catholic teaching here, because it exerts such an influence on most people's use of this word. Saints, they say, are those few whose great spiritual achievements cause them to be set before the church 'as models and intercessors.'<sup>18</sup> That last designation is important, because according to Rome, these saints pray for us in heaven. 'We can and should ask them to intercede for us,' says the current Roman Catholic catechism.<sup>19</sup> People select patron saints and give names of saints to their children; in this manner, says Rome, 'we are assured of

[the saint's] intercession.'<sup>20</sup> 'They do not cease to intercede with the Father for us,' we are told, 'as they proffer the merits which they acquired on earth.'<sup>21</sup>

Under this teaching, saints are adored, venerated, and trusted for salvation. One commonly finds Roman Catholics praying to the saints instead of to God, seeking help from and offering praise to mere dead human beings. The idolatry of this practice lies on the very surface. Furthermore, the idea that anyone may come to God on his own merits—much less with excess merits, as Rome teaches—is offensive to the biblical teaching of sin and of justification through faith alone, and denies the sufficiency of Christ as our Savior and intercessor. It flies in the face of Paul's plain statement in 1 Timothy 2:5, 'There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.' Harry Ironside, in a letter to a Roman Catholic priest, insisted on Christ as the only intercessor we need:

Those who have confided in him as their savior need no other mediator than himself, for he is ever available, his heart is as tender as when here on earth, his love ever flows out to all his own. We need no other intermediary, neither his mother after the flesh, nor any saint or angel to entreat him on our behalf. He himself abides forever...he is our great all-compassionate high priest with God, our advocate with the Father, our one mediator, excluding every other.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore we must not think of saints as superior Christians who offer their merits for us to God, but in Paul's use, *all* Christians are saints. He uses this expression many times in his letters and a glance through them will show that he means ordinary, regular, sinful, struggling Christians like you and me. First Corinthians

presents a classic example, for Paul upbraids those Christians for gross immorality. Yet he addresses even this letter 'to the saints' (1:2).

The word *saint* comes from the Latin word *sanctus*, and means *holy one*. Holiness means set apart by and for God. In this sense we must realize that sainthood is a fact concerning every Christian, something that has happened to all who are in Christ. Leon Morris explains:

The essential idea...is that of being set apart for God. A holy place, such as a temple, is a building not to be used for secular purposes; it is set apart for the worship of God. Holy vessels are withdrawn from all other use and are used only in the service of God. Similarly, 'saints' are people who belong to God.<sup>23</sup>

It is God who makes us saints, who separates us and calls us from the world. Thus all Christians are set apart for God, by God. *Saints* describes something that has happened to us. We have been set apart for God, becoming his property and his holy people. Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:10, 'Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.' We are saints, we are holy unto God; that is what we are.

Sainthood is a fact concerning Christians, but also a calling and an obligation. Those who are separated to God are thereby called to live holy lives. By definition, a Christian is different from someone who is not a Christian. He or she is separated not from people but from sin, not from the world itself but from the principle of worldliness. If you do not want to be different, you cannot be a Christian. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, 'You cannot be a saint and a Christian without being separated in some radical sense from the world. You do not belong to it any longer, you are in it but you are not of it...There is a separation which has taken place

in your mind, in your outlook, in your heart, in your conversation, in your behaviour. You are essentially a different person; the Christian is not a worldly person, he is not governed by the world and its mind and outlook.'<sup>24</sup>

This description should increasingly characterize our lives. Do you find that you no longer think and respond in the way you used to, and that you have new and godly pleasures, interests, and pursuits that mark you out as different from the world? Are you becoming more holy? Take heart if you are, for this shows that God has separated you to himself, making you a saint.

#### TO THE FAITHFUL

Paul's second description of the Christian is *the faithful*. He does not mean those who are trustworthy, or who can be relied upon, but those who live and come to God by means of faith. The New Testament constantly stresses faith—the need to believe the gospel message and trust in God in order to be saved.

This description tells us that to be a Christian we must believe certain things. For this reason, much of the New Testament is devoted to asserting truth and opposing false teaching so that people may believe and become Christians. You are not a Christian if you are simply a charitable person, lead a certain lifestyle, or possess morality and idealism. You are a Christian if you believe specific and essential truths which center on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Paul stresses the necessity of doctrinal belief in all his letters. A clear example comes in 1 Corinthians 15:1–2, where Paul says, 'Now, I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, if you hold fast to the word I preached

to you—unless you believed in vain.’ There are certain truths you must believe; believing otherwise will leave you unsaved. He goes on to give a short list: ‘that Christ died for our sins... that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day...that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve’ (vv. 3–5). People say, ‘I am a Christian but I just don’t believe in the resurrection’; Paul says you are not a Christian unless you do. Furthermore, we must believe not just facts but also the doctrine tied to these facts. Jesus did not simply die; he died ‘for our sins,’ not merely as a moral example or as a statement of God’s love for us, but as a substitute, a sacrifice of atonement. The doctrine of substitutionary atonement is essential to Christianity; without believing it you are not a Christian.

What, then, does it mean to believe? Classically, there are three elements to saving faith, beginning with *knowledge*. It is not enough simply to mouth words, follow some liturgy or go through some religious motions. A man was asked what he believed. He replied, ‘I believe what the church believes.’ He then was asked, ‘Well, what does the church believe?’ ‘The church believes what I believe.’ ‘Okay, then what do you and the church believe?’ The man finally said, ‘We believe the same thing!’ This is not faith, for faith requires knowledge and understanding. This is why we must emphasize teaching in the church, to explain what sin means and what it means that Jesus died for our sins on the cross and other vital truths.

Next comes *belief* or *assent*. There are people who have knowledge and can explain Christian truth perfectly well, but they don’t believe it. Many scholars are like this. They understand the theory of the virgin birth and incarnation, the atonement of Christ, the resurrection and the new birth, but do not accept these doctrines themselves. But faith requires belief.

Third, saving faith requires *personal commitment*. It is not enough to believe in sin; we must acknowledge that *we* are sinners. It is not enough to assent that Christ is a Savior; he must be *our* Savior. This is why John Wesley’s ultimate conversion was so credible; he spoke of *my* sin, *my* salvation, *my* Savior, and so must we.

We must not merely assent to truth, we must embrace Jesus himself: trusting him, relying on God’s promises, committing our hope and salvation into his pierced hands and onto his shed blood. The story is told of a dry, academic preacher who suddenly broke out in tears in the middle of his own sermon; one of the people exclaimed, ‘The preacher converted himself!’ And it was true! Saving faith involves personal commitment; it involves the heart as well as the head. Believing God’s Word, we give ourselves to Christ and take him as our own. We commit ourselves and our souls to his eternal safe keeping.

Are you looking for something to believe in, for someone to trust? This is the great want of our time. A survey of teenagers asked, ‘What do you wish for most in your life?’ Do you know what the answer was? It wasn’t money, it wasn’t success, it wasn’t pleasure. ‘What do you most want?’ they were asked. The number one answer was, ‘Someone we can trust.’<sup>25</sup> The cultural tragedy of our time is no one to trust, but you may turn to Jesus Christ and trust him with your heart, your mind, your life, and your eternal soul. If you are looking for someone to trust, you are looking for him. Have you believed and trusted in Jesus? He said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6); he is the Savior who will never let you down, never let you go, and never fail your need. Trust him and you will be saved.

Faith does not save us; Jesus Christ saves us. For this reason, we should think of faith as being primarily *receptive*. Faith receives Christ and

his saving work for us. The hymn *Rock of Ages* aptly describes how faith makes us Christians: 'Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.' Faith trusts and receives, open-handedly grasping what is promised and offered by God in Jesus Christ. We are not saved *by* our faith, but we are saved *through* our faith as it brings us to the Savior, Jesus Christ. He saves us. Faith brings us to him and lays hold of him for salvation.

Once we are brought to Jesus, our faith becomes an *active* principle. Believing these truths we begin to act upon them; committing ourselves to Christ, we manifest that commitment in our choices and actions. We are called to be faithful to Christ, reliable in his service, ready to defend the truth, and obedient to what he commands. 'To the saints, the faithful,' Paul writes, meaning every Christian, as a description of what we are but also a high calling for our lives.

#### TO THOSE IN CHRIST JESUS

Christians are saints and believers, and most importantly, Paul says, they are 'in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 1:2). This is our third description of a Christian: one who by grace is in union with Christ.

Often, when Christians read Paul's little phrase, 'in Christ,' we think of believing in Jesus. Paul's meaning is better expanded as 'in union with Christ.' By grace and through faith, Christians enter into a saving relationship with Christ by which we receive all the benefits of his redeeming work. We become one with Christ, so that all that is his becomes ours. Christians enter into the same relationship with the Father that Jesus eternally enjoys. He told Mary Magdalene after his resurrection: 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (John 20:17). This means that Christians do not enter into a *similar* relationship with God

that Jesus enjoys, but into the *same* relationship as wholly justified saints and dearly beloved children. What the Father said of Jesus he now declares of us: 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased' (Matt. 3:17). Christians are saved in that the benefits of all that Christ did for our salvation and all that Christ has become by means of his death and resurrection have become ours through union with him. John Calvin wrote: 'All things that belong to our salvation are accomplished in our Lord Jesus Christ.'<sup>26</sup> Salvation, then, becomes ours as we have union with Christ through the bond of faith.

Union with Christ is, first, a covenant relationship. Having come to him in faith, Christians gain Jesus Christ as our representative before God. What Jesus did for salvation he therefore did for us. He died for our sins and therefore we are forgiven. Jesus fulfilled all the demands of righteousness and therefore we are justified in him. He rose from the grave and thus in Christ we possess resurrection life.

The Old Testament shows this covenantal pattern. Genesis 15 records God making a covenant with Abraham for his salvation and for others who would join him. If you wanted to be saved in that time, you had to be *in Abraham*. You had to enter his tents, place yourself under Abraham's authority, receive the mark of circumcision if you were a male, and then serve and trust the God of Abraham. If you entered into the faith of Abraham, you were saved according to God's covenant with him. This passed on to his descendants, so that salvation was *in Abraham*, *in Isaac*, and then *in Jacob*. Jacob's sons became the twelve tribes of Israel. If you wanted to be right with God and receive his blessings, you had to join Israel in the exodus and go with Israel into the Promised Land. This was a legal relationship, a covenant relationship,

and even a geographical relationship. Later, God entered into covenant with David and the tribe of Judah, and salvation became a royal relationship securing salvation for those who looked in faith to God's promises for the Davidic throne.

Finally, the long-awaited Messiah came in the person of Jesus Christ, who fulfilled all the promises attached to the prior covenants. The New Testament shows that being 'in Abraham' had always been merely a way of being 'in Christ.' Therefore Jesus offered 'the new covenant in my blood' (Luke 22:20). Through faith in Jesus' atoning death, we come to him and receive the fulfillment of the salvation God has promised throughout the Bible.

As a covenant relationship, union with Christ is objective. You are either in Christ or you are not. This raises objective questions. Whose lordship do you profess? Whose salvation do you trust? In whose righteousness do you stand before God? You are either in Christ or you are trusting in something else—trusting in yourself, in false Messiahs, or false hopes for your eternal destiny. Paul writes, 'The Lord knows those who are his' (2 Tim. 2:19), and they are all *in Christ*. So the question is 'Are you in Christ?'

Union with Christ is not only a covenant relationship, but it is a personal, spiritual relationship. We come to Jesus the way that Ruth came to her mother-in-law Naomi: 'Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God' (Ruth 1:16). This shows that faith in Christ involves a personal commitment to him. It means swearing loyalty to his cause. It means receiving his love and offering our own devotion in response. We fly his banner from the flagpole of our lives, becoming his disciples and calling him 'Master.' In turn, Jesus pledges to uphold our eternal cause, granting us to eat from his table of

salvation and have fellowship with him forever. He sends his Spirit to live with us, working within us so that we will be transformed into his image 'from one degree of glory to another' (2 Cor. 3:18). He is our saving Shepherd whose Spirit gives us life and power, leads us into truth, speaks peace in our hearts, and causes us to cry out as children to God our loving Father. In these ways, union with Christ is not only an objective, covenant relationship but is also a subjective, spiritual reality. Paul therefore could sum up the Christian experience, writing: 'I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal. 2:20).

#### IN EPHEBUS, IN CHRIST

The apostle writes to readers who are in two places. They are 'in Ephesus' and they are 'in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 1:1). They had a relationship to the world by birth and they had a relationship to Christ through faith. Consequently, they were *in* the world but not *of* the world. They had duties to Ephesus—its rulers and people—but they had salvation in Jesus Christ and their relationship with him determined their true identity and eternal destiny.

The same is true of you, as a believer in Jesus Christ. Outwardly, there is nothing special about you. You look and dress and act largely in the manner of the culture around you. You derive benefits and accept obligations from earthly society. But God has made you holy to himself, separating you by grace for salvation in Christ. You are no longer bound up with the fate of this passing, dying world that is under God's wrath. You are in Christ, by God's grace and through faith, so that what is his is now yours. You no longer belong to the world, partake of its ethos, or follow the world's cravings and rules. 'In Ephesus,'

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we had a sinful manner of life, which Paul describes as 'corrupt through deceitful desires' (Eph. 4:22). In Christ, we gain a 'new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (Eph. 4:24). We now live in the world as Christ's covenant people, representing Christ, serving Christ, trusting Christ, and waiting for Christ to return, when the only world left will be the one in Christ, to the praise of God the Father.

A Christian is to be like the man in John Bunyan's allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan's hero was born and lived comfortably in the City of Destruction. But he read in the Bible that the city was doomed to be judged with fire. He met a man named Evangelist, who told him to begin a pilgrimage to the Celestial City to be saved. Though his family and friends thought Christian had lost his mind, he resolved to depart from the City of Destruction. They called out to him, but he put his fingers in his ears, crying, 'Life! Life! Eternal life!' and left without looking back. Friends caught him and spoke of all the pleasures

and comforts he was giving up, but Christian answered that all he was forsaking 'is not worthy of being compared with what I am seeking to enjoy...an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, that does not fade away...reserved and safe in heaven.' The rest of the book details various challenges and difficulties that Christian faced before arriving safe in the Celestial City. But his new life began, just as it must begin for us, by forsaking the world so as to gain eternal life.

Undoubtedly, as Paul begins his great letter to the Ephesians, he would have us reflect on these matters just as John Wesley did on his boat. Am I a Christian? he asked. Am I a saint? Am I saved through faith? Am I in Christ, no longer belonging to the world? If you cannot give a definite answer to these questions, you should turn to Jesus now. You should repent and give yourself to him, believing his gospel and putting all your hope in his salvation. In Christ Jesus, you will be holy through faith and you will know the salvation of your soul.







### 3

## BLESSING FOR BLESSING

*Ephesians 1:3*

The apostle Paul's letters are marked by both an intensity of teaching and an exuberance of feeling. Some people want to separate the head from the heart, but for Paul such a disconnect was unthinkable. It was the thoughts, the doctrine, in his head that set his heart on fire. One writer says, 'Put a pen into his hand and it is like tapping a blast furnace; and out rushes a fiery stream at white heat.'<sup>27</sup>

If this is true of Paul's letters generally, it is especially true of Ephesians. This first chapter, we find, is as robust in its doctrine as it is soaring in its heights of passion. Paul's greeting gives way to a hymn of praise to God that is one of the most instructive and inspiring passages in all of Scripture. In the original Greek text, it is a single long sentence running from verses 3 to 14. One writer calls it 'a swirl of words with a storm of thought behind them.'<sup>28</sup> If you believe what Paul writes about here, it will revolutionize your life.

When Paul thinks about salvation, he emphasizes the combined operations of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He also follows a historical progression, considering our salvation from eternity past to eternity future. Verses 3–6 focus on God the Father ordaining salvation in the past councils of eternity.

Verses 7–12 speak of God the Son coming into the world to accomplish our redemption from sin. Verses 13–14 tell of God the Spirit applying that salvation to individuals in the present age. At every stage, the Trinity is working together: God the Father ordaining; God the Son achieving; and God the Spirit applying.

Why does Paul think this matters to us? Two objectives leap off the page, first, that we as believers might know our blessings. Verse 3 speaks of 'every spiritual blessing,' and Paul goes to great length to spell these out. There are few things more important for a believer to know than the rich blessings that are ours in Jesus Christ: blessings in the past, blessings in the present, and blessings in the future, all securely provided by God. We need to know, Paul says, 'what is the hope to which he has called you' (v. 18).

Paul's second objective is that this knowledge would inspire us to a life of adoring praise to God. To this end, verse 3 begins Paul's hymn with a progression of ideas built around the word *bles*. 'Blessed be God,' Paul begins, drawing our attention to God's worthiness to be praised. He then tells us why: 'Who has *blessed* us.' In what way? 'With every spiritual *blessing* in Christ.' Benjamin Warfield observes, 'When a man's



lips can frame only this one word—‘Blessing, blessing, blessing!’ we know what is in his heart.<sup>29</sup> Paul would have the same be said of us as we enter into our study of the fullness of God’s saving blessing in Christ. ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,’ he exclaims, and that is what we need to learn to do.

#### THE SOURCE OF OUR BLESSING

Focusing on verse 3, Paul first tells us *the source of our blessing*. From where do these salvation blessings come? He answers that our blessings have their origin in God. Hugh Martin explains, ‘They originate in the mere grace and good pleasure of God, his unfettered, undeserved sovereign love.’<sup>30</sup> We see this in verse 3, where we bless, or praise, God because ‘he has blessed us.’

In this passage from verses 3 to 14, Paul tells us about God being the one who blesses us. He says that our salvation is ‘according to the purpose of his will’ (v. 5). It is God’s will that we should have these blessings, all ‘to the praise of his glorious grace’ (v. 6). God has ‘lavished’ salvation on us (v. 8); this is ‘according to his purpose’ (v. 9). Paul could not have expressed more extravagantly the great truth stated simply in James 1:17, ‘Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.’

Note the emphasis on God the Father. ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Eph. 1:3). This warns us against a grave error common to many people: to attribute salvation to God the Son—to Jesus Christ—while considering God the Father a reluctant participant. We think of Jesus pleading his merits for us in heaven, and we may wrongly conclude the thrice-holy Father must be ill-disposed towards us, watching for a slip-up, aching for an opportunity to chastise, or be distant in his affections for sinners like us.

But what a significant error this is! If God the Son took our sins on the cross it was because the Father sent him into the world to accomplish this task. Jesus prayed before his arrest, ‘I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do’ (John 17:4). John 3:16 says, ‘For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.’ Our salvation originates in the love of God the Father for us.

What a difference this makes to our security in salvation. There is no debate raging within the Godhead concerning our salvation. There is no tension, no awkward silences or heated conversations. Rather there is a grand conspiracy of love originating in the eternal and sovereign grace of the Father.

Perhaps the most crippling tendency many of us have is to doubt God’s love for us. We live in a world scarred by sin; our own lives are plagued by our own sin and folly. We do not feel lovely—and we are not; we do not think we are worthy of love—and we are not. But the Bible says that ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8). Romans 5:8 says, ‘God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’ God sent his precious Son to die for your sins—that is the proof of his love for you. He says: ‘I know the plans I have for you, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope’ (Jer. 29:11). Our blessings come from God the Father, according to his plan of grace for us.

Knowing that God is my heavenly Father is a particular help to me because I happen to be a father. I know what it is like to have a father’s love for my children. Deep within me, far deeper than I can see or touch, there is love for the five people who call me Father. They can make me angry. They can cause me to punish them or take things away. But they cannot make me stop loving

them. I take delight in providing for them. There is nothing more wonderful to me than seeing them grow in grace and knowledge. I delight to share even silly things with them, because I am their father. If only I were able, I would secure a wonderful future for them and I pray for that fervently. But, of course, my love for my children is only a pale reflection of God's fatherly love for me. He is without sin; he is perfect in love. Furthermore, God is not limited in wisdom or strength. God's fatherly love therefore means that I will be blessed as I trust in him. In response, there is nothing wiser than for me to long to please him, to give myself into his keeping and offer myself to his service. He is my Father, and I can completely trust him.

Paul emphasizes that it is this fatherly love of God, working for our blessing in salvation, that brings special praise to God in heaven. What a source of joy it is, to know that it honors and glorifies God that I should be forgiven, accepted, adopted, renewed, sanctified and made an heir of glory! What wonder it is, Hugh Martin writes, 'that I should be called not only to receive freely an infinite, sovereign, undeserved love, but that my reception of it should be the means of throwing light, to the angelic beings, during the eternal ages, on the glorious character and perfections of God?'<sup>31</sup>

#### THE NATURE OF OUR BLESSING

Having seen the source of our blessings, we consider *the nature of these blessings*. What kind of blessing does the apostle have in mind? Verse 3 tells us, 'every spiritual blessing.' Christians derive many worldly blessings from God. Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount not to be anxious for anything because God carefully considers our every need (Matt. 6:25–32). But what causes Paul

to ring forth with special praise to God is the spiritual blessing that belongs to every Christian. There is a double meaning to this. Paul means blessings that are spiritual in character; but these are also blessings that come through the Holy Spirit's work in our lives.

What are these spiritual blessings? Paul works this out in the verses to come. What a blessing it is to know that God has chosen you to be adopted into his household, that before the creation of the world he set his sovereign love on you. However much the world may revile us, Christians are told of God's free and saving love, forged in the eternal furnace of his changeless will. Think, for instance, of a young man who has to work hard for very little pay. But he knows that soon he will come into an inherited trust fund that will provide him with millions. Think of the peace and the comfort this knowledge gives him in the midst of present struggles. We have this knowledge on the grandest scale. Paul writes in Romans 8:16–17, 'If we are children of God, then we are heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.' We have the spiritual blessing of knowing our status as chosen children of God and heirs of eternal glory.

What a difference it makes to know that our sins are all forgiven. Psalm 32 says, 'Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.' Here is peace of mind that money cannot buy, that no pleasure or fame can replace. There is no Christian who cannot revel in this spiritual blessing. Paul adds that God is 'making known to us the mystery of his will' (Eph. 1:9). What a great spiritual blessing comes to us through the knowledge of God's Word! Furthermore, having believed, we are 'sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance' (Eph. 1:13–14). If we are in Christ we can know that the Holy Spirit is working in us with power for godliness. There is hope for change and

a promise of perfection in glory. What a spiritual blessing this is, and we have it now!

Paul praises God for *every* spiritual blessing, all of which every believer may fully partake. There is no difference when it comes to these spiritual blessings; all of them are for all of us. This is *not* God's design with material blessings. God makes some people rich and others poor; some live in comfort and others in pain. But every believer may bless God for the whole of the spiritual blessings with which he has blessed all who are in Jesus Christ. You may be poor, you may be mistreated, you may be hated and reviled, but God's Word stands true: 'The house of the righteous contains great treasure' (Prov. 15:6).

Do you know these blessings? Do they sustain you in the trials of this life? Do they keep your heart from a sinful love of this world? God is spirit, and his chief blessings are in keeping with his nature. They are all available to us now by faith; Paul stresses not merely our future enjoyment of spiritual blessings but their present possession: 'God...has blessed us.'

#### THE LOCATION OF OUR BLESSING

Third, Paul makes a definite statement regarding *the location of our blessings*. He says God has blessed us 'in the heavenly places.' Paul never spells out exactly what he means by this expression, but since he uses it several times in Ephesians we can piece it together well enough. In 1:20, Paul says that God raised Christ from the dead and 'seated him...in the heavenly places.' In 6:12 he says that our present struggle is not against flesh and blood but 'against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.' Paul has in mind, therefore, the spiritual realm that we do not see but that is real and vital to our lives. This is what Jesus was talking about when he said to Pilate, 'My kingdom is not

of this world' (John 18:18). His kingdom is unseen and spiritual. It is of faith now, but will be made visible in the world to come when he returns. This is where our blessings are found, not in the realm of things you can touch and feel. But our spiritual blessings are real—more real, in fact, than the worldly blessings we can see.

Let's just take one blessing, our adoption as children of God, which Paul writes of in verse 5. Spiritually, in the heavenly realms, we are blessed with adoption as God's children. This is true of us now but it is not visibly manifest in this earthly sphere. No royal robes fall from our shoulders, no visible insignia marks us out as royal sons and daughters. Angels minister to our needs, yet no eye beholds them. No crowds gather to watch as we pass by, though we are chosen for an eternal inheritance with Christ. The newspapers do not follow the day-to-day progress of our pilgrimage to glory. How odd all this is from the perspective of the heavenly realm. To the minds of angels, this is what is happening in this world—rebels against God are being converted, are adopted as his children and are journeying to their home in glory! The world could not care less; indeed, it looks down on those who are God's children. How strange that is to angels in heavenly realms!

Likewise, our redemption in Christ makes little visible impression on our earthly lives. Wearily we battle temptation. Painfully we toil under diseases and afflictions which take no notice of our spiritual status. Ultimately, death will place its bony hands upon us just like everyone else; our spiritual blessings will not keep us from the grave. Yet all the while in the heavenly places we have treasures of riches and wholeness and life everlasting; they are spiritual, they are real, and they strengthen us in the trials of this life.

Since our spiritual blessings are located in the heavenly realm, no one on earth can take them

away. This was the testimony of the early church father Justin Martyr during the times of Roman persecution. In his *First Apology* (c. 150), Justin challenged the Roman authorities to consider Christians fairly. One thing they should notice is the Christian testimony in the face of tyranny and injustice. ‘For as for us,’ Justin wrote, ‘we reckon that no evil can be done us,...and you, you can kill, but not hurt us.’<sup>32</sup> The joy and peace of the persecuted believers showed that their spiritual blessings were safe in the heavenly realm, far from the reach of wicked men. Justin continued:

And when you hear that we look for a kingdom, you suppose, without making any inquiry, that we speak of a human kingdom; whereas we speak of that which is with God...For if we looked for a human kingdom, we should also deny our Christ, that we might not be slain; and we should strive to escape detection, that we might obtain what we expect. But since our thoughts are not fixed on the present, we are not concerned when men cut us off.<sup>33</sup>

The value of having spiritual blessings safe in the heavenly realm is especially seen in the face of death. For unbelievers, death is an unmitigated disaster. Queen Elizabeth I spoke on her deathbed to her lady-in-waiting: ‘It is over. I have come to the end of it—the end, the end. To have only one life, and to have done with it!’<sup>34</sup> The French philosopher Voltaire, who had so mocked Jesus during his life, faced death with panicked despair. His physician recorded his last words: ‘I am abandoned by God and man! I will give you half of what I am worth if you will give me six months’ life. Then I shall go to hell; and you will go with me. O Christ! O Jesus Christ!’<sup>35</sup>

Faith in Christ enables believers to face death far differently, knowing the spiritual blessings that are ours in the heavenly places. Paul stated,

‘For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain’ (Phil. 1:21). Paul wrote to Timothy when he realized that the emperor Nero would soon put him to death, saying that ‘the time of my departure has come’ (2 Tim. 4:6). His attitude was one of joyful expectation: ‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day’ (2 Tim. 4:7–8). What a difference it makes in life and especially in death to possess spiritual blessings from God in the heavenly places, where no tyrant can deny them, no thief can take them, and no corruption will mar them.

The world thinks life is about acquiring money, power, and prestige; having exciting experiences; and feeding the fleshly nature with pleasures and entertainment. But Christians nurture our souls with fruit from a different tree; we think success is an increased perception and reception of spiritual blessings found in the heavenly realm by faith. This is why we spend time in Bible studies, in prayer meetings, in personal devotion, and at church. Our life together as believers is about strengthening our faith amid the troubles of life, so that by faith we might increasingly take possession of these blessings that are ours in Christ. What is more, they are blessings we desire to share with others as we lead them to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

This is a connection Paul makes about our spiritual blessings: they are *in the heavenly places* and they are *in Christ*. Paul writes in Ephesians 1:20–22 that when God raised Jesus from the dead he seated him ‘at his right hand *in the heavenly places*, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over everything to the church.’ Jesus Christ is now

Lord of the unseen realm; all the blessings that reside in the heavenly places are under his control for the sake of his people.

What this means is that we must go to Christ for these spiritual blessings. All our blessings are *from* God the Father and *in* Christ. We might use a business analogy, with God the Father as the producer of all these spiritual goods; out of his eternal council all our blessings are made. Jesus Christ is the sole distributor, licensed by the Father to dispense these blessings. 'I am the way, the truth, and the life,' he said (John 14:6), and God's blessings are found in him alone.

#### OBTAINING GOD'S BLESSINGS

This leads us to an all-important question. How do you get these blessings for yourself? The answer is obvious from all we have said. If you want to be blessed in the heavenly realms with all the spiritual blessings God gives, you must go to Christ, through faith and prayer, confess to him your need of his redeeming work, and receive from him all the blessings of salvation, beginning with forgiveness of sin and ending with an eternity in glory. John 3:36 tells us, 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.' Have you done this? Have you come to Christ for your salvation? God has made him the one way by which we can have cleansing and adoption, forgiveness and redemption from sin.

If you have come to Jesus, then you need to know what your blessings are and to feed on them spiritually through faith. Your faith needs to declare to your heart that these spiritual blessings are yours. Are you anxious for the future? God's Word promises that in Christ you are beloved as God's child and your Heavenly

Father will provide for you, since before creation he purposed an inheritance of eternal riches for you. Are you weak in the face of trials and temptations to sin? God has blessed you with access to the Holy Spirit through faith and prayer, to give you spiritual strength from the heavenly realms. Are you burdened by guilt, by your sense of failure, by lack of hope? Look in faith to the heavenly realm, where Christ is seated at God's right hand. He died for your forgiveness, and he lives forever to save you to the uttermost. Paul therefore says, 'We do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day...We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal' (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

If you have not come to Jesus, acknowledging him as Lord and Savior, if you have not confessed your need for him to give you the blessings that he alone can give, then you need to understand what this verse plainly implies. It is true that you may find blessings from God apart from Jesus Christ, but they are worldly ones only. God is good towards the world in common grace; he makes rain to fall and the sun to shine on the unjust and on the just (Matt. 5:45). You may find in God's kind providence all the blessings this world has to give: wealth, love, power, pleasure—blessings that will perish with this passing world. But of these spiritual blessings you will know nothing unless you are in Christ through faith in him. 'For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking,' Paul wrote, 'but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 14:17). This and much more will be yours if you will come to Jesus Christ, receiving God's saving blessings from him who came, died, and rose again that we might have eternal life in him.



## 4

### CHOSEN IN CHRIST

*Ephesians 1:4*

When I was ministering in the city of Philadelphia, some very large construction projects took place there. As I passed by these sites I noticed how much work went on before anything could be seen at level ground. Particularly with very tall buildings, a great deal of labor and care must be given to the foundation. If you want a building to stand fast, particularly one that reaches high into the sky, then you must dig deep and plant a very firm foundation.

Paul shows a similar concern in Ephesians 1 as he begins constructing the edifice of Christian salvation. He intends us to see a work of the ages that is infinitely high, reaching up forever. This is where Paul is headed as he begins his hymn of praise for the blessings of God. So he begins by digging deep, setting the firmest foundation. God is leading us into eternity future, and so it is in eternity past that God sets the groundwork of our security. Paul writes, 'He chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.'

#### THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION

Ephesians 1:4 provides one of the clearest statements of what is known as *the doctrine of election*.

This teaching gets its name from the Greek word *eklektos*, the verb form of which is translated here as 'chose.' This verse and its doctrine teach that all the blessings we enjoy as Christians are grounded in the sovereign choosing of God, which took place in eternity past, long before we were born. Here is the foundation on which the salvation of every believer rests: God's own free and gracious choice of us. This is the strongest, firmest foundation possible—God's own eternal purpose—and it is upon this that Paul would have us ground our hope for salvation.

Paul tells us that our election is 'in him,' that is, 'in Christ.' This means that when God decided our salvation, he did so through Christ's saving work for us. Peter speaks of Christ as the 'lamb without blemish or defect...foreknown before the foundation of the world' (1 Pet. 1:19–20). Revelation 13:8 calls Christ 'the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world' (NIV). These descriptions show that even in eternity past God's will included the problem of sin and sinners. There is no conflict, therefore, between the doctrine of election and salvation by faith in Christ, for God elected that Christ would die for the sins of his people and that the elect would have faith in Christ and thus be saved.

