

Ephesians 1: 1-14 The Blessings of Being IN Christ

Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the letter to the Ephesians “the divinest composition of man.” The letter was John Calvin’s favourite and across the last 2000 years this book has been a glorious, faith-building, Christ-revealing, barrier-breaking, life-shaping, community-building letter to Christians of every age, and my prayer is that as we study this letter over the summer it will be exactly the same to us today.

If you’re not familiar with this letter, let me encourage you to read it through a whole number of times over the next few weeks. There are only six short chapters so it will take you perhaps just 20 minutes to read it. But if you can see the whole of the letter it will make the individual studies really come alive. So do try to make time to do that over the coming weeks.

The argument of the letter runs like this: As Christians we are IN Christ. And being IN Christ does 3 things: it changes how we view ourselves, it unites us to fellow believers and it requires us to live differently. Society today wants us to find our identity in our jobs, our possessions, our looks, our families or our sexuality. But as Christians the fundamental basis for our identity must be in Christ and if we get that right everything else falls into place.

So turn to page 1173 of your Bibles and let’s have a look through the first part of this letter together.

Paul’s letter begins with a word about himself, details of who the letter is for and a blessing. There is some debate as to whether this letter was written only to the church at Ephesus because some of the earliest manuscripts, as you’ll see from the footnote, don’t name a specific church. But many early sources, dating to the first century, have no doubt that Paul wrote this letter to the church at Ephesus. So it’s possible it may have been copied and sent to other churches afterwards, so they could be blessed by the contents as well.

But whether this letter was sent only to the church in Ephesus, or to others as well, verse 1 tells us that it is written *“to God’s holy people... the faithful in Christ Jesus.”*

How holy do you feel this morning? On a scale of 0 to 10, where are you? This letter was written to God’s holy people, literally the saints of God – so do you think that what Paul says here applies to you? Are you, am I, a saint? You see according to the Bible, if we have come to God in repentance and faith and have trusted in Jesus as our Saviour, then that is what we are. I’m not talking about sinless perfection – only Jesus has ever lived a morally perfect life- I’m talking about person who, through faith in Jesus, is a new creation, someone who has been born again, who has moved from being an object of God’s wrath to being a beloved child of God. I’m talking about ordinary Christians. If that’s you – then you are a saint.

And that’s vital to grasp because so often we behave according to what we think we are and how we feel about ourselves, whether that is positive or negative. I’m a failure – so I won’t try. I’m brave - so I’ll try anything. Paul wrote this letter to the saints in Ephesus so they would start to understand more about their true identity in Christ so their lives would, in turn, reflect that spiritual reality. And throughout this glorious passage that idea is rammed home time and time again using this phrase ‘in Christ’. So what does it mean to say that as Christians we are IN CHRIST?

Being a Christian isn’t having Jesus alongside us like a spare pair of hands to help us cope when things get tricky. Being a Christian is being in Christ so that we gain everything that belongs to Christ, his identity, his family, his status, his power, his calling, his battles and his future become ours. It is an all-encompassing identity which defines us and increasingly refines us.

It’s hard to explain that simply so before we break it down let me use this analogy. If you’ve seen the Harry Potter films you’ll know that when the students arrive at Hogwarts they are put into one of four different houses. For all of their time at school their house becomes their family and their home. When their house succeeds, they share in the victories. When their house is struggling, they bear the shame. As the films progress you see how the history of the houses is mirrored in the lives of the students and how they even take on the characteristics of the founders of their houses. Well, when a person become a Christian they join the house of Jesus but in a far deeper way than even those in Gryffindor house got to enjoy. When we come to Christ He becomes the root of our identity, his Father becomes our Father, his family becomes our family and his Spirit becomes our Spirit and all that Christ has and does becomes ours.

That means that in Christ we have **a new identity: a child of God**. Look down at verse 5. *“In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.”*

If we are in Christ we are children of God. You might think that being adopted would make us somehow a second-class member of God's family, but that isn't the case. In the context in which Paul was writing this letter, adoption was always to the full rights of natural children. If you were adopted, you became a son or daughter. Your inheritance rights and authority in the family would be exactly the same as a natural child.

And what is even more amazing is that according to verse 4, we were destined for adoption into God's family before the creation of the world. That is an astonishing thought. Perhaps you've experienced being the last to be picked for teams at school, or the last one of your friends to get a job or find a spouse. But God didn't wait till the end of the line before he chose you. He chose you from before the beginning. Isn't that glorious! God chose us! And if you're worrying about what that does to your free will, and you want to ask "but didn't I choose God?" The answer comes back from the Scriptures "yes, you did and freely, but only because in eternity God had first chosen you." Now that is a mystery which the Bible doesn't fully explain. But it is a wonderful thing to know that God the Father chose us and adopted us into his family because it means that since we didn't do anything to deserve his choice, we can't do anything to lose it. If we are in Christ we have a new and secure identity as a child of God.

And since in Christ we are a child of God, that means we also have a **new family**.

The astonishing truth of the gospel is that through faith in Christ, the Father of Jesus becomes our heavenly Father and so Jesus becomes our perfect elder brother. Let that sink in for a moment. In Christ you are not just a member of your human family and a citizen of this nation or the nation where you were born, you are part of God's family. God, who has existed in the glory of the Trinity through all eternity has invited us in to his family and in Christ we are seated with him in the heavenly realms. That is the family where we truly belong. Sometimes human families can be terribly difficult, but if we are in Christ we are part of the Divine family with the Father as our Father, with the Son as our brother with the Holy Spirit as our Spirit.

If we are in Christ we have a new and extended human family because in Christ all other Christians become our brothers and sisters. When you are in Christ you are part of the world's largest family made up of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, old and young, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, people of every shape and size and colour from every nation under heaven. The theme of unity between Christians is a strong thread that runs through particularly the first three chapters of this book and it is a wonderful truth. Look around you this morning and you'll see we are all different; and yet if we are in Christ we are brothers and sisters with the same heavenly Father. If we are in Christ, the walls that the world puts up between people of different backgrounds come tumbling down. If we are in Christ then we are family.

As part of adopting us into his family, we also have a **new status: we are righteous in the sight of God**.

Since God is pure and holy and righteous we can only be brought into a relationship with him once our sin has been dealt with and taken away. To be in God's family we need to be made righteous but in Christ that is what we have. Verse 7 tells us that *"in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."*

In the parable of the prodigal son, the elder brother stays at home and let's his younger brother go his own foolish way and does nothing to save him. But Jesus, our perfect elder brother came to our rescue and through faith in the finished work of Jesus and his blood shed on the cross we can be completely forgiven. So when we are in Christ we discover that our debts have been paid, the bonds of sin that held us tight have been shattered and that we are counted righteous in God's sight. To steal the words of a wonderful hymn, in Christ we are "ransomed, healed, restored and forgiven." And whilst we might still struggle with sin, our sin no longer defines who we are. We are not merely a sinner saved by grace, as Christians we are in Christ, counted righteous, adopted into God's family as a beloved child of God who was chosen before the foundation of the world. Our struggles with sin may rob us of our joy and damage the closeness with our heavenly Father, but they cannot alter our identity or change the fact that in Christ we are counted righteous.

But God does not leave us alone to struggle with sin, so in Christ we have a **new power: The Holy Spirit**.

Verse 13 reminds us that having believed we were marked in Christ *"with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit."* Verse 14 describes the Holy Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing our inheritance. One day we will be made perfect, one day our battles with sin will be no more, one day, as co-heirs with Christ, we will inherit the new heavens and the new earth and be with the Lord for ever, and as a down payment securing that future for us, so we know it is ours, the Father has given us the Holy Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come. The sign and the seal of the Holy Spirit, God's

presence with us, is like that moment when you are buying a house when contracts are exchanged. Completion is a little way off, but the deal is done, the date is in the diary, and you know for certain it will happen. Now of course we don't know when the great day of the Lord will come, but the Lord does, and his Spirit is his guarantee that we will not miss out.

But the Holy Spirit is more than guarantee, he is the strength and power to live for Christ now. Verse 3 tells us that as those in Christ we have been blessed *"in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."* Right now, by the Spirit of Jesus in you, you have everything you need to live the life God has called you to. Every spiritual blessing in Christ is yours if you are in Christ.

Now you may not understand what some of those blessings are right now, but they are there. You may not be able to use some of the gifts and talents and blessings that are yours in Christ, but you are not lacking. It's as if in Christ we have been bequeathed an enormous estate with farms and buildings and factories and woods and streams and things we have never seen. But they are ours, whether we know that or not so as we grow in our Christian lives the resources we need to live for Christ are already ours by the Holy Spirit.

And that's vital, because in Christ we have **a new calling: holiness**. Let me read you verse 4 again: *"for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."* When God chose us, we had done nothing to deserve it. According to the Scriptures our righteousness, compared to God's perfect holiness, is like filthy, rotten rags. That's how we match up to God! But although God rescues us as we are, although we can come to God as we are, he doesn't leave us as we are. And having been brought into God's family and having received God's Spirit we are called to grow more like God in our character and behaviour and desires. Our new calling is holiness and chapters 4, 5 and 6 will unpack this for us in some detail and help us to see what it means to live blameless in his sight.

I have vague memories of being given a huge knitted woollen jumper one Christmas, from a grandparent I think. And when I tried it on, you can imagine what my parents said: "it's a bit big for you now, but you'll grow into it."

The righteousness of Christ is a bit big for us now, isn't it. We don't match up, but as we go on in our Christian lives we are supposed to grow into the perfect robes that Jesus has given us to wear. And with the Holy Spirit at work in us and with a heart that seeks to please God, we will make progress. It isn't always easy. It isn't always linear. But since we are in Christ, holiness of life is our calling.

I've said it isn't always easy, and that's true, and what makes it harder is that we don't just battle with enemies within, such as our own weaknesses. As those in Christ we face **a new battle: against the world and the devil**.

This isn't a theme which comes up in our passage this morning, but I want to mention it because it does crop up throughout the letter and particularly in chapter 6. You see, whilst we are going our own way, whilst we are living for ourselves, for today, for pleasure and ignoring the claims of Christ, then our enemy the devil is not at all bothered. But once we are in Christ we will find ourselves in his sights.

And we should expect nothing less, because that is what Jesus experienced. And if in Christ, his Father becomes our Father, his Spirit our Spirit, his righteousness our righteousness, his inheritance our inheritance, then surely his battle will become ours too. If they hated Jesus, they will hate us. If they persecuted him, they will persecute us. So being a Christian can be incredibly difficult, and a number of you I know are facing that right now.

So don't be shocked, don't be knocked off course by it. Instead, remember that Paul wrote this great letter whilst he was in prison and chained to a Roman soldier, and count yourselves worthy to suffer for the name of Christ.

And remember one final thing, that in Christ you have a **new future: The Kingdom of God**.

Verses 9 and 10: *"With all wisdom and understanding, God made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."*

One day Jesus will come back as King, and when he does his perfect Kingdom will be brought into being. On that day all persecution and struggles will cease because every knee will bow before King Jesus. On that day, there will be no more pain or suffering or grief or tears because under his perfect rule evil will be done away with. On that day there will be no more division between different denominations, or between different nations, or between the genders, or between people who prefer different styles of worship because all things will be united perfectly under Christ.

And that, friends, is your future, your destiny for all eternity if you are in Christ. And knowing that helps us to see that our present struggles are no more than momentary. Friends, we know the end of the story. We know that history is neither meaningless nor purposeless but that all of history is heading towards God's perfect goal when everything will be united in Christ. And we know that if we are in Christ then kingdom of God is our future.

In Christ we have a new identity, a new family, a new status, and new power, a new calling, a new battle and a new future. That's what it means to be in Christ. Everything of his becomes ours! Isn't that glorious! And my prayer is that over the next few weeks as we grasp the glorious truths in this letter, that the reality of who we are in Christ will become the dominant narrative at the front of our minds and it will change the way we think and live and love and serve.

But we must not think this is all about us because ultimately God's purposes in bringing us into Christ, blessing us in Christ, uniting us with Christ have all been **for the praise of God's glory**.

A phrase like that comes up 3 times in these short verses. Verse 6 tells us that the Father predestined us for adoption to sonship *"to the praise of his glorious grace."* Verse 12 speaks about the Jews being chosen by God *"for the praise of his glory"* and verse 14 points to the uniting of the Gentiles into God's family as being *"to the praise of his glory."*

You see we are not the centre of the world: God is. The world, including human beings, was created so that God's glory would be revealed. God's plan of salvation is for *"God's good pleasure and will"* (verse 5) so his goodness would be seen and his mercy celebrated. When Jesus comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead, his purpose isn't simply a wonderful eternity for Christians but that God's righteousness might be revealed.

And if that makes you feel a little uncomfortable, perhaps because you think it makes God out to be rather self-centred, then that's because your vision of God is far too small. We are creatures, not the creator. We are finite, not infinite. We are fallen not perfect. Yes we are fearfully and wonderfully made, but we are made in the image of God to point to him.

But the wonderful thing is that when we have God and his glory front and centre, when we live to please him and not ourselves, we actually find that life is so much better because that is what we were made for. When we live our lives in praise of God it's as if we are going with the grain, or swimming with the current, or running with the wind. The truths we've seen this morning about being in Christ should bring us great joy and hope because these are our blessings, but ultimately everything is for the glory and praise God.

This passage ends with the focus on the praise and glory of God, so that's where I'll end with this prayer. May we grasp the wonder of what it means to be in Christ, may we revel in the love the Father has lavished on us in giving us a new identity, a new family, a new status, and new power, a new calling, a new battle and a new future. And may we live all our lives to the praise of his glory. Amen.