

“Every Spiritual Blessing In Christ”

10 May 2020 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship:

Well, good morning and welcome to our service of worship. We are delighted that you have joined with us, and it is encouraging to know that we are together even while apart and that we worship as a united people. We begin a new teaching series this morning looking at the letter to the Ephesian church. As you know, many are talking about “the new normal” and that things will be different whenever we lift these restrictions on the 18th of May gradually. I have sensed over the last number of weeks God prompting me to look at this letter to the Ephesian church. It is, actually, the letter that I looked at when I first came to Adelaide Road in 2008, and this talk today is the same sermon, in a sense, that I gave in my first sermon in Adelaide Road. So, it is a new beginning. I hope to preach a section of this letter every month, following the title this month of New Life, as given in John Stott’s commentary. Paul is super excited about the good news and this opening statement is an express train of delight, a single sentence poured out, which begins, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ”. That is our theme today, *every spiritual blessing in Christ*. So, let us worship God as we sing our opening praise: *this is amazing grace, this is unfailing love*.

Praise: This Is Amazing Grace

Prayers of Adoration and Confession:

Dear Father, how amazing is Your grace - how wonderful, how precious! We were all lost, dead in our sins and trespasses, unable to believe, unable to enjoy Your presence, unable to see Your glory, Your power; unable to see Your wisdom, Your might, Your mercy; unable to enjoy Your love. But Thy grace, O Lord, Thy grace alone cannot be measured. It saved a wretch like me. And when I was still weak - when we were still weak - at the right time, Your Son Christ Jesus died for the ungodly, ungodly people like us. O Lord, teach my heart and the heart of my brothers and sisters to fear You, to deeply fear You. Deliver us from superficiality. How many times we deceive ourselves with false appearances of holiness - holiness, O Lord, holiness without which no one will see the Lord. Deliver us from this present evil age and protect us. O Lord, in this day, I ask You please, *please* Lord, deliver us from superficial preaching, deliver us from superficial teaching. O Lord, give us a preaching that is profound, a preaching that is deep, comprehensive, full of courage and power. O Lord, please look into our situation. We are desperate, Lord, to know more and more, deeply more, of You. O Lord, we are living in very difficult days. How many lives, in so many different ways, have been impacted, deeply impacted, by the current situation! We don’t know what is about to happen in the next weeks or months, but help us today, Lord, *today*. Deliver us from anxiety about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for today is its own trouble. Don’t let us doubt Your providence in such difficult days. And we know that all things work together for good of those who love Thee. Your providence is never late, Lord, and never early. Help us to serve You and worship You at home today, in our homes. Preserve the faith of Your people and deliver us from the flaming darts of the devil. Father, I thank You that You have heard me. I know that You always hear me, O Father, and in the name of Your Son, Jesus, I pray, amen.

Reading: Ephesians 1:1-14

Sermon:

So, thank you, Jonathan, for reading the passage and the opening section of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church, Chapter 1:1-14.

I have a box of currently unused business cards, and on those cards I describe myself as the Rev. Sam Mawhinney. So, "Rev.", of course, is short for reverend, which means that I am a member of the clergy and I'm meant to be reverent. It's a title that I've been given by the church. In the opening to the letter to the Ephesian church there are lots of titles used! Paul has a title and job description in the word *apostle*: it means he met the risen Jesus on the Damascus road and was called to a position of service, authority and leadership in the church. The title and its responsibility were given by God. The church members in Ephesus are addressed by Paul as "the saints in Ephesus", literally "the holy in Ephesus". Again, this is given, and it comes from their being faithful, having faith, trusting in Jesus Christ, and they have been given grace and peace from God the Father and His Son, and so are declared to be saints, a status given by God.

It is in this reality that Paul goes on to speak in the next verses (3-14), and he pours out an incredible list of what it means to have the blessing of being in Jesus Christ. And I was struck by how excited Paul was about this. "Praise be to God" he says, and he pours out in one sentence this incredible list of spiritual blessings of being in Christ Jesus. He speaks *eleven times* of them being "in Christ". And our task this morning is to unpack as clearly as we can what it means to be in Christ.

So we've been told, haven't we, to stay in our houses. And if we're in our houses, that is the safest and best place to be, because of the threat of the coronavirus. And Paul is arguing that to be "in Christ" is the very best, the safest, the most blessed place to be, spiritually speaking. So, I realise that many people think that *spiritual* means some fuzzy, unreal, escapist, good feeling experience, and that it's hard to quantify, and is separated from the reality of life and the world in which we live. The testimony of the Bible is exactly the opposite. The blessing of Christ is concrete, it is based in His life and His work while here on earth, historical, witnessed, and recorded. Neither is it escapist. These folks lived in Ephesus. They were part of the community and you can read the amazing story of the founding of the Church in Ephesus in Chapter 19 of Acts. The Bible speaks of a real, and yet unseen, spiritual reality that is part of the world that we inhabit. Paul calls it here "the Heavenly realms" and he is reminding the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ, exactly what these spiritual blessings are, what it is those who trust in Christ are given by God. So, let's have a look, and I would really recommend that if you have a Bible close at hand that you open it. Paul packs a lot into this passage, and it helps, I think, if we can see it written down.

I. Chosen Before Creation

So firstly, God the Father chose us in Him before time (vv. 4-6). This is mind blowing stuff, staggering really. Picture the scene: before time, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are having a conversation about an idea, a vision and it's of a choice. God chooses you to be in Jesus, you see that in verse 4 - "He chose us in Him." God saw you in a relationship with Himself through Jesus. The purpose of that is that you would be "holy and blameless, in His sight", literally before Him, and that you would be adopted into the family of God, that you would be His child, with access to God the Father. And nothing would give Him greater pleasure, because He did it all because He loved you. So therefore, it is not because of any merit in you, because at this point in time you were not

even born. It is simply because He loved you and chose you in love, creating you and graciously bringing you, through Jesus, into a relationship with Him.

I realise that I am stating something that for many is extremely difficult. We have questions: “do I have no say? Do I not choose to believe in Jesus? What about others? How do I know that I am chosen?” There are answers, I believe, to these and other questions, and I want you to ask them if you’re concerned. But if we stand back, and hear, and by faith grasp the wonder of what is being said here, it is the most brilliant and lovely thing that is for our encouragement and for our good. “He chose us in Him before the creation of the world!”

II. Redeemed By His Blood

And secondly, Paul says that, in the present, Jesus redeems us (vv. 7-8). You see, within humanity there is an instinctive sense that realises wrongdoing, demands a payment. We call it justice. So, I might park in a disabled parking space and walk away and come back again a few hours later and find that I am clamped and have a penalty notice on my windscreen. Not many of you are going to have much sympathy for me. It was wrong of me to park there, it’s inconsiderate, it’s lazy, and public opinion and the judicial system will not be lenient towards me.

And sadly, humanity disregards God in a like manner. We have no concern for Him, no concern to do what He likes - to be holy and blameless in His sight - and we proclaim ourselves the boss of our bodies and our lives, a deep seated attitude that declares with pride, “I know best! I know what’s right for me!” However, God loves us and He came not to judge us but to redeem us, and it cost Him the blood of His own son. He paid the price and bought our forgiveness. And this is a fantastic blessing which is only achieved in Him. It is applied by our faith in Jesus, the historical reality of His life, death, resurrection and ascension. And, you see, the cross is both grace and justice, and that is why (in verse 8) Paul calls it here “all wisdom and understanding”. So, in Him we have redemption through His blood.

III. United Under Christ

And next, Paul goes on to say God has purposed in the future “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Jesus Christ” (vv. 9-10). One of the ways we dismiss the Christian message is to say it’s, “pie in the sky when you die”, meaning that, as I have said, that it’s some fuzzy, spiritual, floating in the sky belief. It’s like the picture given to us in the Philadelphia Cheese ad! Paul could not disagree more. The vision is that God will take everything in this created world, both heaven and earth, its riches, resources, beauty, and all the variety of its physical reality, and He will unite this with His chosen, redeemed family, the church of Jesus Christ, from all ages, all nations and bring to fruition a plan He conceived in eternity. And He brings it about at the time of His choosing, when His will is fulfilled. “All things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Jesus Christ.”

IV. Sealed By The Spirit

And Paul finishes this sentence by further outlining a further blessing, namely that everything is guaranteed by the giving of the Holy Spirit, a deposit of all the blessings (vv. 11-14). It’s a kind of down-payment of the actual thing that guarantees completion. “Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.” You are included in Christ and the blessing is appropriated by hearing and believing the gospel as just outlined (v. 13). I hope, like Paul, you can see the magnificence of this plan for you, the church, the saints in Dublin. There are wonderful

implications because of this gospel, regarding, for example, your identity, God's claim upon your life, your security in this world, hope that sustains, the unity and togetherness of being in Christ, and the importance of the church, and Paul will draw these out later in the letter: new life, new society, new standards, and new relationships (as John Stott names them).

However, Paul isn't asking us to think about the implications just yet. He wants us to praise God, praise the glory of His plan, praise the glory of His character, praise the glory of His Son, Jesus, praise the glory of this magnificent, glorious plan of forgiveness and to bring us into His presence, holy in Christ, to be His family, to be His treasured possession. He starts the sentence praising God and he finishes with praise because of the wonder of the gospel, *every spiritual blessing in Christ*. So, how will we respond to this amazing good news? It is an incredible offer of love. To accept it is life changing, to reject it is to reject the loving plan of God for your life and is beyond sad. Having heard the word of God, we are called to believe and praise the glorious riches of His grace. God longs that you will accept the blessings offered in love. Amen. Let us pray.

Dear heavenly Father, we have had time this week to sit and consider the wonder of creation: a super-moon, the freshness of new leaves on a beech tree, the busy and friendly robin, the warmth of the sun. It is glorious and speaks of Your character, power and love. We praise You. Thank you, too, for Paul's deep appreciation of the spiritual blessings we have in You, for the wonder and significance of having been chosen by You; Your love and willingness to pay the cost of our sin, through the blood of Your Son, Jesus, on the cross; the hope in Your plan to renew and restore everything in heaven and earth for us, Your redeemed, at a future date. Indeed, You have blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Thank you that You have done this and revealed this to us. Help us believe and praise Your glorious grace. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

And so we praise God in the words of our next song, which is called, "His Mercy Is More", written by two Matts: Matt Boswell and Matt Papa. *His mercy is more*.

Praise: His Mercy Is More

Prayers for Others:

Dear Father, we come to You now with our prayer requests. You invite us to come with confidence to a loving God who cares deeply for all humanity. Thank you for creating such a beautiful world for us to live in. We acknowledge that You *are* in control of our world, even though the COVID pandemic keeps spreading and is impacting all our lives. As part of our world begins to emerge from this pandemic, we pray Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We pray for a turning of hearts of all peoples, and their leaders to You, so that justice, righteousness and truth will be established among nations. We thank You that Jesus Christ was lifted up on the cross to draw all people to Himself.

We thank You, Lord, for the many who have recovered from this virus. We pray for those who are struggling to get back to health again. We pray for comfort for the families that have lost loved ones at this difficult time. We continue to pray for all frontline workers. Grant protection, strength, and stamina to keep going day after day. We pray for Dr. Tony Holohan, the Chief Medical Officer, for Minister for Health Simon Harris, and Taoiseach Leo Varadkar. May they give strong and wise leadership at this time. We pray for a measured approach to the unwinding of lockdown. We pray for all scientists as they research a vaccine. And we thank You and pray for the many and varied essential workers who keep our services and food supplies going. We pray for all our citizens as we

continue to live with restrictions. Help us all to act responsibly and wisely in leisure time, in working time, and at all times.

We pray for all who are facing uncertain futures, job losses, financial difficulties, health issues and many other concerns. May this be a time when many turn to You, our Living God, and find peace and security. May we find that You are a refuge, and a present help in times of trouble. In the absence of pressures and demands, may we find time to be still in Your presence, to reevaluate Your perspective on the issues of our lives, and to appreciate again with a deeper understanding Your love for us. We think of the many young people facing uncertainty around the Leaving Certificate exam. May clarity on the way forward come very soon. We especially pray for Aaron Speer as he comes to terms with the new reality. We pray that the government childcare plans for the care of children of frontline workers will be worked out in a fair and safe manner. We especially pray for the Board, manager, and staff of Sunflower Creche as they consider the way forward.

We pray for our church family. We remember William Brereton in hospital awaiting a transfer. We pray for Lorraine's mother, Beryl, recovering in hospital after an operation. We thank You that Doris Mitchell is out of hospital and recovering at home. We pray for special blessings on Martha Jones, who celebrated her 80th birthday this past week. And remember all those whose hearts are heavy and have concerns that cannot be shared openly. Thank you that we can talk to You about all things and You come and help us. We thank You, too, that talks on the formation of a government have started. We pray that the talks will progress with vision and fairness. Give wisdom and clarity to the negotiating teams as they decide about very challenging issues, such as climate change and the economic recovery of our country. Please help us all to keep looking to You as we go forward into another week. May we be more and more aware of Your presence with us at all times. We present all these requests in the precious name of our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Closing Praise: IPH 408 In Christ Alone

Benediction:

And so we finish our service by saying these good words, taken from the letter to the Ephesians, in Chapter 3:20-21. "Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen."