

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON FOUR)

“BLESSINGS IN HEAVENLY PLACES”

EPHESIANS 1:3

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.”

As we study the letters of the Apostle Paul found in the New Testament, we will find ourselves marveling at his ability to summarize the entire gospel in a few words. This is exactly what he has done in **Ephesians 1:3-5**. Let us read his summary as it is rendered by the **New Living Translation**: *“All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.”*

Before we examine these verses, it is important for us to observe the context in which they are located. In the first verse of the epistle, Paul informed the Ephesian Christians of who they were. He addressed them as the *“saints”* and the *“faithful”* who were *“in Christ Jesus.”* Then, in the second verse, he informed them of the benefits which they should be enjoying as a result of their being who they were. He did so in the words which formed the common greeting of Christians in the first-century church: *“Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Having informed them of who they were and the benefits that they should be enjoying as a result of being who they were, Paul in verses **3-5**, advises them of how it is that they have become saints and faithful ones in Christ Jesus and how it is possible for them to enjoy the wonderful blessings of grace and peace. There is a sense, then, in which we can say truthfully that verses **3-5** are the centre of the entire Epistle. In this **Lesson**, we will direct our attention to verse **3**.

As we read this letter, it is very clear that above everything else, Paul desired for the Christians in Ephesus to come to an understanding and realization of who they were in Christ and of the great blessings that were available to them as a result of who they were in Christ. In other words, he yearned for them to understand the entire salvation process, not merely the three-step formula outlined in **Acts 2:38!** He knew that unless they understood these two things, they would never be able to enjoy the Christian life as they should. That is why he writes so passionately in verses **17-20** of **Ephesians 1**:

17 I pray that the Father of glory, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, would impart to you the riches of the Spirit of wisdom and the Spirit of revelation to know him through your deepening intimacy with him.

18 I pray that the light of God will illuminate the eyes of your imagination, flooding you with light, until you experience the full revelation of the hope of his calling — that is, the wealth of God’s glorious inheritances that he finds in us, his holy ones!

19 I pray that you will continually experience the immeasurable greatness of God’s power made available to you through faith. Then your lives will be an advertisement of this immense power as it works through you! This is the mighty power

20 that was released when God raised Christ from the dead and exalted him to the place of highest honor and supreme authority in the heavenly realm! (The Passion Translation)

Brothers and sisters, the same applies to us today. We need to understand these things also for if we do not, we will never be able to realize the full benefits of our salvation.

In his commentary on **Ephesians** chapter 1, relating to these verses, the Welsh Protestant minister **David Martyn Lloyd-Jones** made the following remarks: *“Whether we know it or not our main trouble as Christians today is still a lack of understanding and of knowledge. Not a lack of superficial knowledge of the Scriptures, but a lack of knowledge of the doctrines of the Scriptures. It is our fatal lack at that point that accounts for so many failures in our Christian life. Our chief need, according to this Apostle, is that ‘the eyes of our understanding’ may be wide open, not simply that we may enjoy the Christian life and its experience, but in order that we may understand the privilege and possibilities of our high ‘calling’. The more we understand the more we shall experience these riches. A lack of knowledge has ever been the chief trouble with God’s people.”*

Brothers and sisters, it is for this reason that we have embarked on this study of the book of Ephesians. We must consider **Ephesians 1:3-5** very carefully because in these verses the Apostle Paul introduces us to this knowledge and begins to explain this doctrine which will lead us into an understanding of who we are in Christ Jesus and help us to come to full maturity in our Christian walk.

Whenever we come to an understanding of who we are in Christ Jesus and of the benefits that we should be enjoying as a result of this, we will inevitably be led to worship God Almighty. As Paul begins this section of his letter, a note of praise erupts from his innermost being: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.”*

If we examine Paul’s epistles, we will find that they are filled with praise and thanksgiving. This is so because he understood the doctrines of grace. It was this understanding that led to this outburst of praise. When we truly understand what grace and peace mean, it will transform our worship and our prayer experience, because a true realization of the nature of God’s salvation always leads to praise.

Brothers and sisters, the doctrines of grace clearly indicate that our salvation is entirely from God. However, due to our pathological self-centeredness and pride, we tend to think and talk about salvation only in terms of our experiences and our feelings. Now there is nothing necessarily wrong with that, for there is no genuine Christianity which is not experiential and which does not affect how we feel. But our Christianity is not merely about our experiences and our feelings. It is also about our realization of what God has done for us in Christ, who we are in Christ and the benefits that we should be enjoying as a result of being in Christ. We must come to appreciate that it is the extent of our understanding of the nature of our salvation that ultimately determines our experience!

The truth is that if we really want to worship God sincerely, if we genuinely want to say *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”* from our heart, we must know something about the great salvation that He has made available to us in Jesus Christ and which is made known to us through the medium of the gospel of the grace of God.

Paul informs the Christians in Ephesus that God had blessed them with *“all spiritual blessings.”* I believe that Paul uses the word *“spiritual”* here primarily to describe the blessings as having their source in God and not in human beings. The blessings are *“spiritual”* in the sense that they are not *“the works of the flesh”* but the grace gifts of God. He also uses this word in order to emphasize that the nature of the blessings is not physical or material but are related to eternal life.

In the Old Testament, the way to estimate whether or not a person was blessed was to look at their material blessings - the number of cattle, sheep, goats, gold, silver, land and children that they possessed. The more of these things that a person owned, the more blessed they were considered to be. But in the New Testament the blessings are *“in heavenly places.”* This phrase indicates that spiritual blessings have their origin in heaven and are brought from there to us. They are blessings that convey to the spirits of persons living on earth, a heavenly reality. It means that Christians, while still living in their bodies on earth, are able to enjoy, right now, some of the blessings which they will enjoy in heaven.

Brothers and sisters, it is important for us to understand that Christians are in a unique position. We are **in** the world but we are not **of** the world. We operate in two realms: the human realm and the heavenly realm (ie. the visible realm and the invisible realm).

Physically, we are on the earth in a human body, but spiritually we are seated with Christ in the heavenly realm. It is the heavenly realm that provides the power and direction for the earthly walk. It does not matter where we may be on this earth. Wherever we are, we are seated in heavenly places with Jesus Christ, and this is the basis of our life and power.

In **Philippians 3:20**, Paul says, *“But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior” (New Living Translation)*. We reside in Jamaica but we are citizens of heaven.

Paul emphasizes this truth in **Colossians 3:1-4**: *“Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God’s right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory” (New Living Translation)*. Our attitude to the world should be one that recognizes that it is God’s world, and therefore, we should enjoy it and everything in it that God has given to us in it. But we should never set our affections on it, for if we do, we will become conformed to it.

The Apostle Peter expresses the same idea in **1 Peter 2:11-12**: *“Dear friends, I warn you as “temporary residents and foreigners” to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against your very souls. Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world” (New Living Translation)*.

The Christian is merely passing through this world. He or she is never to feel entirely at home in the world. We must constantly bear in mind the solemn words of our Lord recorded in **Matthew 6:19-21**: *“Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be” (New Living Translation)*.

Paul informs us that God has not merely blessed us with *“spiritual blessings,”* but with *“all spiritual blessings.”* This is an astonishing reality. There is no blessing that is lacking. From our being chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world to our enjoying eternal bliss in the presence of our Lord and Saviour, and everything else that is sandwiched between these two great eternal realities is already ours! This reminds us of what the apostle Peter wrote in **2 Peter 1:3-4**: *“By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence. And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world’s corruption caused by human desires” (New Living Translation)*.

Paul underscores this **Romans 8:31-32**: *“What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won’t he also give us everything else?” (New Living Translation)*

“All spiritual blessings” refers to every spiritual enrichment needed for the spiritual life. Since these benefits have already been bestowed on believers, they should not ask for them but rather appropriate them by faith. We read of something similar in **Joshua 1:14**: *“Now after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord it came to pass, that the Lord spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ minister, saying, Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon even unto the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and unto the great sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your coast.”*

Joshua did not have to ask for land since God had already promised it to him. Instead, he was to enter into the enjoyment of God’s provision.

Brothers and sisters, Paul says, *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.”* He does not say that God intends to bestow these blessings upon us in the future. He says God has blessed us with all these spiritual blessings already. Paul uses the past tense participle *“hath blessed”* to indicate that the spiritual blessings of the saints occurred in eternity past. What was necessary to obtain and secure these blessings has been done once and for ever.

Paul is careful to inform us that all these *“spiritual blessings”* are *“in Christ.”* Paul does not say *“through Christ,”* He says *“in Christ.”* The phrase expresses one of the dominant ideas of this epistle. Here, the phrase *“in Christ”* qualifies the whole statement of the blessing in its bestowal, its nature, and its origin. The cause of all the spiritual blessings and the reason for them and the manner in which they become available to us and are secured by us is *“in Christ!”* This is so because His act of redemption is the instrumental cause of these blessings being given freely to us. Apart from Christ, the blessings would have no relation to us. They are ours because we are in Him who is our Representative and Head.

In our next **Lesson**, we will begin to consider the *“spiritual blessings”* which all those who are *“in Christ Jesus”* have received and should be enjoying.