

Included, Informed and Inheritance

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[0 : 00] We're going to move on to our reading now, so if you want to turn to Ephesians, we're looking at the first part of Paul's letter to the Ephesians on page 976 in the Church Bibles.

So we're looking at the first 14 verses here of Paul's letter, Ephesians chapter 1, and I'll read from verse 1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

In love, he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will. to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the beloved.

In him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

[1 : 52] In him, we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him, who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we, who were the first to hope in Christ Jesus, might be to the praise of his glory.

In him, you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we require possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Well, please do have Ephesians open in front of you there. We're going to be looking at the first 14 verses, as we read a little earlier.

So do have Ephesians open. Now, I wonder, do you ever feel intimidated as a Christian? Are you ever tempted to feel like you're not on the winning side, that everyone else out there has it right?

Do you ever feel intimidated? It often feels that way as we live in the day-to-day, in the week-to-week, as we look around us, as we see the powers and influences that come in upon us all the time.

[3 : 22] You might think of the political powers. You might think of economic, cultural, the social attitudes that are developing in our society, the impressive-looking brands and companies that shape our likes and dislikes.

All these people, powers, institutions, cultural forces, they exert a real influence over us. In comparison to the church, those things look infinitely more influential, impressive, better.

There's a certain pressure on us, as Christians, to follow the impressive-looking world, to conform to its values, to toe its line.

There's a sense that we ought to keep our faith under wraps, to keep it quiet, just to play it down. How do we stand?

How do we stand against the power and influence that comes at us from every direction? Why should we keep going with the church, which looks really quite unimpressive when compared to the outside world?

[4 : 39] It's easy to be intimidated, to shrink into the shadows. I wonder if that's how you feel.

Certainly how the Ephesians felt. Let me take you back to first-century Ephesus and try and imagine what it might have been like to be a Christian there at the time.

Ephesus was a big and impressive city. It was second only to Rome in the Roman Empire in terms of power and wealth. Big city, quarter of a million people.

When we get a good flavour of the city there in Acts, chapter 19, Paul spent a couple of years there building and establishing the church in Asia. And what comes through loud and clear as you read that account in Acts is that Ephesus is a city steeped in the religion of Artemis.

Big religion. Everyone was at it. The temple of Artemis was the biggest building in the known Greek world at the time. It could house 10% of the city's population.

[5 : 49] Imagine trudging along to your small house church as crowds, thousands of people flocked to the temple of Artemis.

So tempting to go along with the crowds. Those Christians used to go to that temple. How tempting it would have been to go along with what looked impressive and big.

That many people can't all be wrong, surely, they would have thought. They might have been tempted to think, are we really on the right side? Are we really on the winning side here?

There's a good example in Acts, chapter 19, of what it might have been like. There was a huge uproar in the city as Paul's preaching was converting people and people were moving away from the religion of Artemis.

And this was putting some people out of business. The Artemis Shrine Builders Union were in uproar. Their profit margins were being threatened by the preaching of the gospel.

[6 : 56] Huge uproar. 50,000 people gathered to protest. And they were chanting, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

You would have heard it across the city. Imagine being a Christian in Ephesus at the time. Under Roman rule, surrounded by the cult of Artemis.

An uproar in the city. People chanting Artemis' name. Huge, powerful institutions urging them to toe the line. To keep their newly found Christian faith under wraps.

How would you have felt as a Christian then? Imagine quite similar to how we feel now in Glasgow in 2014. There was then and is now a real temptation to become intimidated by the impressive looking reality around us.

Paul is writing this letter to the Ephesians to encourage them. He wants them to stand firm in the face of everything else out there. The world, the flesh, the devil. He wants them to stand firm.

[8 : 05] And he's writing to encourage them to do that. But how are they going to do that? How are we going to do that? Well, in the first half of Paul's letter, he gives us rich and deep truths about who God is and who you are as a Christian in Christ.

He spells out the realities. He wants his readers to think differently. He wants them to think rightly about who they are. The letter is, as one commentator put it, about identity formation.

He wants these Christians to know who they really are in Christ. Knowing these things is going to help them stand firm. Knowing these things will give them a solid foundation in the midst of pressure.

If you want to stand firm, you need a solid foundation. My young daughter is learning to walk.

If you put her in her socks on our wooden floor, she slides all over the place. She needs a solid foundation if she's to stand firm. And it's true of these Christians here in Ephesus and true of us.

[9 : 21] We need a solid foundation if we're going to stand firm. And Paul gives it to us. Here at the start of the letter, Paul writes to remind his readers of the invisible realities.

He's writing about their solid foundation, but it's not visible. He's saying, look, God has greatly blessed you in Christ. You're now informed and included in his plan to bring everything together under Christ.

That's what he's wanted to communicate to his readers. Paul wants them and us to praise God because of these truths. Truths that will help them see clearly what God is really doing in the world.

His plan to bring everything together ultimately in Christ. That's what's going on. And it's already begun in you, Christian. These truths will help them stand firm in the battle that they are facing.

Paul is basically saying, here is who you are in Christ. You're informed. You're included. And you have a great inheritance. Great reasons to praise God.

[10 : 37] Great reasons to stand firm. So let's look on, shall we? And look at these verses. Firstly, Paul gives them reason to praise God because they are included in God's plan.

They are included in God's plan. The main point there is in verse 3. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Here is who you really are, Christian in Ephesus. You are blessed with every spiritual blessing. So praise the God who has blessed you. You may well feel like a small outfit in your house church compared with the visible realities around you.

But here is the reality of who you really are. Invisible spiritual blessings. Just as real as the material blessings they are enduring.

But these blessings that Paul outlines here last forever. They do not fade. They do not spoil. These blessings last forever.

[11 : 51] And Paul goes on to unpack what he means by these spiritual blessings. And he points in three directions. He says, look back, look to the present, and look to the future. So firstly, look back, verses 4 to 6.

Look back, you've been chosen. God has chosen you before the foundation of the world. Before the world itself came into being. Before a single human being set foot on the earth.

You were chosen. That is truly mind-blowing, isn't it? Doesn't that give you great confidence as a status as a Christian?

Great confidence that you've been chosen before the foundation of time. How do we know that we're chosen? Well, look down to verse 13.

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance.

[12 : 56] How do you know you've been chosen? Have you believed the gospel? Have you heard the word of truth? Have you responded? Believing. We are Christians by faith.

But that faith is not something that we cook up ourselves. It's not something we create in our own selves. The origin of our faith is found in God's action and purpose.

Before the foundation of the world, he chose us. Your being a Christian wasn't a late call from God. It wasn't a mistake.

No. Chosen before the foundation of the world. Paul goes on. He's emphatic. In love, he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ.

Not only are we chosen, but we are chosen to be adopted into God's family. We are his children. Now, it's hard to do justice to these words.

[13 : 58] These are huge, great theological ideas contained in a few short verses. It would be easy to get sidetracked by some of the concepts here to go down talking about what is exactly meant by predestination, adoption, redemption.

Many questions no doubt fire off in your minds. But we need to pay attention to Paul's purpose here. He isn't writing a theological textbook on the subjects mentioned.

He mentions these things so that we might praise God. So that they would see who they really are in Christ. Look back, says Paul. You were chosen before the foundation of the world.

So praise God. See your identity, your true identity in Christ. And know the security that brings. He has chosen you.

He will not let you go. Know the security as you look back. Look to the present, says Paul, verse 7. In Christ, we have redemption through his blood.

[15 : 07] The forgiveness of our trespasses. According to the riches of his grace. Christian, you've been liberated from your bondage to sin. No longer are you facing the due penalty for trespasses.

You've been rescued. All made possible, verse 7, by the blood of Jesus. Now these people that Paul was writing to would have known that.

Paul was there for a couple of years. He would have taught them this already. Paul was writing to remind them of what they already knew. He wants them to see clearly who they really are now in Christ.

This is your identity, Ephesian Christian. You are chosen. You're redeemed. So praise God for that. And this is your identity, Christian, in Glasgow 2014.

Chosen. Redeemed. Praise God for that. Imagine for a second if this wasn't true.

[16 : 17] Imagine if God hadn't chosen and redeemed us. Imagine if it was down to us. What are the implications? Well, a complete lack of security for one thing.

No certainty of assurance. We would have just floated into the Christian life by accident with nothing to stop us floating off again. We were chosen. God chose you before the foundation of time.

What assurance, what confidence that gives you as a Christian as you live out your life in a world that presses in upon you. You've been chosen.

You've been included in God's great plan. So that's the first reason that Paul gives us here, to praise God, to stand firm. You're included in his plan.

Let's look on to that plan itself in verse 10. Praise God, says Paul, because you've been informed about his great plan to unite all things in Christ.

[17 : 21] Not only have these Ephesian Christians been chosen and redeemed, not only have they been included in God's purposes, but they've also been informed about God's great plan for everything.

Here is the crux of the whole letter. Here's the big picture of what God is doing in the whole universe. Look again at verse 10.

It's easy to let these words wash over us, but look again, verses 9 and 10. Making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

God has made known to them and us his plan for the fullness of time, to unite everything together in Christ.

In other words, his plan is to bring everything, everything together in Christ. This is the big plan. This is where history is going.

[18 : 39] This is what God has been at work to achieve since the very beginning. All things, Paul's emphatic, things in heaven, things on earth, everything being brought together and reunited in Christ.

Think back to Genesis and the fall in Genesis chapter 3. Everything up to that point had been wonderfully together.

There was no sin. There was no death. There was no relational chasm between man and God. But at that moment, when Adam and Eve disobeyed, everything changed.

Everything disintegrated. The whole cosmos was ruptured. Fault lines appeared everywhere. Between man and God.

Between man and creation. Between man and woman. Everything was ruptured. Divided. But God has a plan to bring everything together again.

[19 : 49] In the fullness of time, in Christ. That is where things are going. In Christ, God means to save his creation. To restore it.

To transform it into the glory of its original destiny. That is what God is doing. And you, Christian, have been informed of what God is doing.

It's here in black and white. This is what God is doing in all of history. You've been informed. You know God's great plan.

This is a huge, massive privilege. You know where history is going. Now, why did the Ephesians need to hear this?

Why did Paul have to tell them this? Why did they need to hear that they've been informed of God's great plan for everything? Well, remember. Remember, this is a relatively small band of Christians in the metropolis of Ephesus.

[20 : 54] Swimming against the religion of Artemis. It doesn't really look like they're on the winning side there, does it? Thousands flocking to the temple. A small group in a house church.

It doesn't look impressive at all. In fact, I'm sure the Ephesian Christians felt small and insignificant. But, says Paul, you know the big picture.

You know where everything is going. You know what's really going on in history. The very real problems that you guys are facing day to day, struggling against the world around you, facing the spiritual battle against the devil, facing your own fleshy desires and temptations.

These problems are real and hard. But, Christ is overcoming. This is where things are going. What now is divided, he is bringing together in that last day.

And what reassurance that would have given them, as they were living there in Ephesus. And what reassurance that gives us, here in Glasgow. We know the big picture.

[22 : 09] We know where things are going. Everything else is blown out of the water, isn't it? When we grapple with this reality. When we see what is really going on in history. Everything else, blown out of the water.

Here, in black and white, is God's eternal purpose. This is where everything is going. Now, looking around church this morning, as you glance at your neighbours, there is much to encourage, isn't there?

We fill every available corner in the building. But all we have to do, is walk out the front door, and see thousands of people flocking to the shops on Buchanan Street.

We realise that actually, we're quite a small outfit, in a big city. And there is a great temptation to feel a bit hopeless, to feel intimidated, to feel insignificant.

It's tempting to think that. But Paul blows that out of the water. Here's what's really going on. God has a plan to bring everything together.

[23 : 16] He's bringing it all together, and you're included in that plan. You're included because you are in Christ. That is the great truth of Ephesians chapter 1.

So don't be discouraged, as you head back to your car in half an hour's time. And you see lots of people heading to the shops. Don't be discouraged, as your university lecturer belittles the Christian worldview.

Don't be discouraged, when you're the only Christian in your office, or workplace. God has a plan. You're included.

He has richly blessed you, with every spiritual blessing in Christ. He's included you in his plan. You've been informed of his plan. The Ephesian Christians were in on the know.

And you are too. What a privilege. We need not fear. Rather, we press on with confidence, pulling together, because God has a plan, and we're included.

[24 : 23] Now, briefly, as we close, let's look on to the final paragraph, verses 11 to 14. And here, Paul gives us reason to praise God again, because your future, as Christ's inheritance, is guaranteed.

Your future, as Christ's inheritance, is guaranteed. Paul points our eyes forward here, in this last paragraph, forward to the Christians, a certain future.

In these verses, there's a wonderful reality, of the unity we all enjoy in Christ. Regardless of background, and privilege, Christ has redeemed his chosen people, the church.

Notice, there's a strong, Jew-Gentile comparison going on here. Look at verse 12. So that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, that is, Jewish believers, so that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be to the praise of his glory.

In contrast to the Gentiles, verse 13, in him, you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, believed in him, and were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

[25 : 43] Jewish believer, Gentile believer, both are in Christ. Both are included. Both have a guarantee, of the inheritance to come.

And Paul, later on in the letter, emphasizes the oneness, of the believers, regardless of background. Whether they're from a Jewish background, or Gentile background. And in the church, God is already, bringing these things together.

Things on earth, already being brought together. He's brought together, Jew and Gentile. And that is a picture, of the ultimate reality. That is a picture, of what God will do in the end.

So, the church, is a picture, of what is going to happen, in the end. So, regardless of background, your future, as Christ's inheritance, is guaranteed.

Therefore, you're in no way, inferior, to any other believer. You are both, Christ's inheritance. And the purpose, for both is one. They're both, to praise God.

[26 : 54] Look at the end of verse 12, where it's speaking, about the Jewish believer. What's their purpose? So that we, might be to the praise, of his glory. And look at the end, of verse 14, where Paul is speaking, about the Gentile believer.

What's their purpose? To the praise, of his glory. Regardless, of who you are, your purpose, in Christ, is the same.

It's to bring, praise, and glory, to our heavenly father. As we step back, and see the glorious, truths in this passages, we see, two key applications, for us I think.

In relation to, the world out there, you Christian, are able, to stand firm, in the battle. To stand firm, against the forces, that are out there.

The forces that would push us, to privatize our faith. You can stand firm, reassured, that you are not, insignificant. Despite how things, might look, you are not, insignificant, because you are, informed, and included, in God's plan, for everything.

[28 : 05] You've been chosen, you're included. And knowing, these great blessings, knowing these things, to be true, will enable you, to stand firm.

When the visible evidence, is to the contrary, knowing these invisible realities, is going to help you, stand firm. So have you, counted your blessings, Christian?

Do you realize, these blessings, that Paul mentions here, are true of you? Read over this, passage this week. Learn these verses, remind yourself, of these blessings.

They are true. This is who you are, in Christ. And then in relation, to the people of God, in relation to the church, Paul is saying here, you are one, and the same.

Regardless of what, your background might be, Jewish or Gentile, you are one, and you can stand, united together. Now as we look around, church this morning, it doesn't matter, about our background.

[29 : 15] Whether you've experienced, the privilege of being, brought up in a Christian home, or whether you've become, a Christian later in life, you are one, and the same. There are no grounds, for feeling superior, or inferior, in Christ's church.

You are one, and the same. So as you glance over, to your brothers and sisters, at church this morning, resist the temptation, to gauge, their Christian pedigree, and performance, against yours.

So that you can, in some way, feel superior. There is no place, for that, and Paul's thinking, at all here. Our blessings, are in Christ alone.

Not through anything, that we might bring, to the table. You have the same blessings, in Christ, because, you've been given, the gift of faith. Praise God for that.

Praise God for, every other Christian, here this morning. Don't point score. Perhaps, there's someone, I need to speak to you, afterwards. Someone that you need, to apologize to, because that's been, your attitude.

[30 : 24] We are one, and the same, in Christ. We are united, in Christ together. We are his church. One final observation, to make on the church, before we close.

We've seen the big, driving idea, in this passage, and indeed, the whole letter. And it's that, in Christ, God is bringing, everything together. That's his eternal purpose.

That's the big idea. Things in heaven, and things on earth, brought together. And God's bringing, things together, has already begun, in the church.

People from every tribe, tongue, and nation, are being brought together. And the church, us gathered here, this morning, everyone across the globe, who gathers in Christ's name.

That church, is a visible picture, of the future, and as yet, unseen reality, when God will one day, bring everything, together, under Christ.

[31 : 26] that's what the church, is a picture of. That must, give us a huge vision, of what church, is all about.

We are part, of something significant. Praise God, that he is uniting, us together, in Christ. Thinking this way, ought to make us, value church hugely.

And thinking in this way, enables us, to unite together. And that is what Paul, is urging the Ephesians, to do in the second half, of his letter.

Thinking this way, enables us, to do it on the ground, to unite together. Church, is a significant thing. And it's a picture, of what God is doing, in the end.

So seeing this reality, about church, there's no scope, for the lone ranger Christian, who doesn't think, church is important. Church is vital.

[32 : 28] We have church membership, next Sunday. Being part of the church, is crucial. It's what God is doing, here, and now. It's a picture, of what's going to happen, in the end.

These, key applications, standing firm, in the battle, and uniting together, as a church. Paul goes on, to unpack, in the second half, of his letter. But here, Paul wants us, to see, and understand, clearly, the reality, of the Christians, blessings, in Christ.

He wants us, to see that, and understand that, so that we can live out, what Paul goes on, to say, in chapters, four to six. You have been, greatly blessed, in Christ. You are, part, of his eternal plan, to bring, everything, together, in Christ.

What great reason, we have, to praise God, as we see, we've been included, and informed, of his, cosmic plan.

Praise God. Let me pray. Father, we thank you, for your many, many blessings, that you give, to every Christian, in Christ.

[33 : 54] Thank you, that they are, available to all, who hear, the word of truth, the gospel, of your salvation, and believe, in Jesus. Thank you, for these blessings, that are outlined.

Thank you, that you've made, known to us, your plan, and purpose, for all of history. A plan, for the fullness, of time, to unite, all things, in him.

Things in heaven, and things on earth. So, Father, help us, to praise you, help us, to count, our blessings, in Christ. Amen.

Amen. . Thank you.