

Reasons for Thanking God that the World Cannot Remove
Ephesians 1

Turn to Ephesians 1 please. This sermon is called “Reasons for Thanking God that the World Cannot Remove.” That is entirely different than the sermon notice I sent you all on Monday, about Jeremiah’s laments. I switched from Jeremiah 20 to Ephesians 1 between 9 and 10 yesterday evening. I plan to do Jeremiah’s laments next Sunday.

This has to do with Lent, and how we thank God. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, which is the beginning of Lent. Lent is the 40 days before Easter, not counting Sundays. Lent is traditionally a time of sorrow for our sins, but it always seemed to me that the Bible would rather we deliberately thank God than that we deliberately mourn our sinfulness.

Forty Days of Gratitude. Here’s a suggestion, and that’s all it is: on the back table are little note books. Take one if you want. I number 40 pages, and each day for 40 days I write down, in a few words each, five reasons to thank God. After I write them down, I take a few minutes to thank God for those five things. They don’t have to be five new things every day. Repeats are fine.

If you forget a day, that’s fine. I number the pages 1-40, and I keep going until I’ve done 40, and usually it takes longer than until Easter. If you want to deny yourself something during Lent, we could try 40 days without complaining, deny ourselves the luxury of complaining. But that’s not the point here. For 40 days we could thank God every day for five things.

Reasons for thanking God that the world cannot remove. I have noticed over the years that the NT writers usually thank God for different kinds of things than we thank God for. And when they pray for people, they pray for different things.

What I really want to do in this sermon is to take our thanks to God and our prayers to God away from our circumstances. It is good and right to thank God for things in our circumstances, and to ask God to change our circumstances. That happens right through the Bible.

But in the NT, most of our examples of thanks to God have little to do with our circumstances, and most of our examples of prayers to God have little to do with our circumstances. Let’s try to shift in this direction. Most praise to God and most prayer to God in the NT is not connected to our immediate lives. Big picture thanks, and big picture prayers.

Every day, let’s thank God for at least one thing that has nothing to do with our circumstances.

Ten Reasons to Thank God (Ephesians 1)

From Ephesians 1 we will see ten reasons to thank God. None of them have anything to do with our lives right now. The first seven are given us as reasons to praise God. The last three are given as Paul's prayer requests for the Ephesian church. But all ten are reasons to thank God, and let's find a way to make things like this come out of our mouths toward God.

Ephesians 1 Praise: Seven reasons to praise God (1:3-14)

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

*(1) who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing **in Christ**.*

This one is an opening summary. In a different realm that we live in, God has blessed us with everything he has to give, and it happened in Christ. In the eternal realm, where God lives, we have all he can think to give us. He gave it to us by joining us to Christ.

(2) For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

Now we the specifics. It begins far in the past. Before the world began, God chose us. This is how every spiritual blessing began: God choosing us before he made us. This "choosing" will bring up questions in your mind, which we can't really answer. But we'll still accept it.

He chose us to be blameless and holy in his sight. That's what he had in mind. And, it happened "in him," in Christ. Even back then, in this ancient choosing, we were bound to Christ, so we could be holy and blameless.

*(3) In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us **in the One he loves**.*

God blessed us, he chose us, and now we read that he predestined us. He chose us, and then he aimed us. He chose us to be holy and blameless, and then he aimed us toward adoption. He did all this in love. He loves us, and Christ is the ultimate beloved One. And Jesus Christ is front and center. Our adoption happens through Christ.

And the purpose here is that we will praise his glorious grace. Let's not wait until heaven to praise his glorious grace.

*(4) **In him** we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us.*

He chose us before the world began, he predestined us for adoption, and then he redeemed us. That means he bought us back, bought us out of slavery. We were trapped for life, and he bought us out, the price being the blood of Christ. This is God's rich generosity to us. We have this redemption because we are "in him," in Christ, joined to Christ, bound to Christ, one with Christ.

*(5) With all wisdom and understanding, he 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 fulfillment) to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.*

In the Bible, a "mystery" is not a puzzle or something hard to understand. In the Bible a "mystery" is something that's clear, but we'd never have known it unless God told us. We'd never have figured it out on our own.

God told us the mystery of his will, which is where heaven and earth will end up. Heaven and earth will end up unified under Christ's rule. In different words, this is the new heaven and new earth at the end of Revelation, everything clean and new, and every knee bows to Christ and confesses that he is Lord. God wanted us to know how this all ends, and that's good to know.

God wanted us to know this. In his kind wisdom, he decided to inform us of his plans for heaven and earth under the rule of Christ, when the times reach their fulfillment. So we praise God because we don't have to fear how this ends. We know, and it's the best.

*(6) **In him** we (believing Jews) were chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we (Jews), who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*

Six and seven have to do with Jewish believers and Gentile believers. The Ephesian church is mostly Gentile. It was God's plan that the gospel would go first to Jews, and some of them believed. God's choosing is thick here: *predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.* (Whew!)

And this is so that God's glory would be praised. He does this for us, and we respond by praising him for his grace and his glory.

*(7) And you (Gentiles) also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked **in him** with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.*

We Gentiles were included. God included us in Christ, when we heard and believed. And the proof and evidence that we were included when we believed is that we received the Holy Spirit. And the #1 evidence that the Holy Spirit is alive and well in us is that we can say, "Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, and he has full rights to my life."

If we can say that and mean it, the Holy Spirit is alive and active in our lives. “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit. 1 Cor 12, verse 3 or so.

But the work of the Spirit here is all toward the future. We are sealed, marked as God’s own, so that when he comes to get his own, it will be clear who they are. We are marked with a seal, the Spirit himself, for that day.

Our inheritance is guaranteed. We don’t have it yet of course, but it is guaranteed, the Spirit as a seal and also as a down payment guarantees it. God will redeem us, he’ll come and get us. God included us “in Christ,” and the Spirit marks us as those “in Christ.”

And it ends, *for the praise of his glory*. Since that’s the fourth time we read this. God blesses us, and we praise him. That’s how the relationship works.

Let’s review the seven: (1) God blessed us, (2) chose us, (3) predestined us (aimed us), (4) redeemed us (bought and paid for us), (5) made known to us, informed us, (6) chose Jews first, then (7) included Gentiles, proved by giving us the Spirit.

God does this all with lavish love and grace, so that he’ll be praised. We do praise him in these ways in our songs. But let’s make a point of including things like this in our “praise items.” All of these are things that our circumstances cannot change, and the world cannot take away.

The big picture of our lives is incredibly good. And I do not know a better way to get my mind on these things than to actually say them to God in thanksgiving. To do what this section says for time, to praise God for things like this, to make the words actually come out of my mouth.

Thanking God, praising God, is a duty, a labour, and a healer. It is a duty, an obligation. It is a labour, it is work. And it is a healer, a mind healer, a soul healer. And sometimes it is just joyful exuberance.

Ephesians 1 Prayer: Three Prayers, also Reasons for Thanks (vv18-19)

*I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know:
(8) the hope to which he has called you,*

We have been called by God to something we have not seen at all. It still waits. Paul prays that the eyes of their heart would see the light, and that they would get a feel for their hope. Thank you, God, that you have called us to an incredible hope, every blessing you could think of in the heavenly realms.

(9) the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and

This is more or less the same thing, in different words. We are heirs. Our Father is God Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth. What will it be like to have him pass on his wealth to his loved children?

(10) his incomparably great power for us who believe. God's unbelievable power is on our side, to bring us from where we are now to what we hope for, to the riches of his glorious inheritance.

God's incomparably great power is taking us:

- from his choosing us, which happened before the foundation of the world,
- through our being included, hearing and believing the truth,
- through the present difficulties and joys, and
- into his glorious inheritance, our hope.

(8) Thank you for calling us into hope, and that you help the eyes of our hearts see our future.

(9) Thank you for the riches of the glorious inheritance you are giving your people.

(10) Thank you that your indescribable power will see us through from start to finish.

The big picture of our lives could not possibly be better. We could not imagine a more pleasing and satisfying position to be in, than the big picture of those like us who follow Christ. And the best way to get our minds on these things and to make them real enough to enjoy is to actually say them to God in thanksgiving. To make the words actually come out of mouths.

Thanking God, praising God, is a duty, a labour, and a healer.

It is a duty, an obligation. God has done this to bring praise and glory to himself. He has earned it, he has a right to it. He has done these things to for us. They are all completely true, even though our lives have difficulties. We receive all these things, we want them, and in Christ we have them. And we know it.

So give him credit, give him his due. If you can't tell him that you feel thankful, fine, don't. But Revelation often says "you are worthy, Lord, to receive glory and honour and thanks." Tell him he is worthy, because he is, and we know it, and that we can say. Want a relationship with God? This is how it works: he gives lavish love and grace, and we return thanks to him.

It is labour, it is work. Don't be surprised. Most of us are not naturally grateful people. I certainly am not. It is work because our minds and souls are still dark and twisted, and our minds and souls are fixed on the little bubble of trouble that we live in.

We live in one of these transparent plastic balls that a person can get into. It is floating on God's river, a bright joyous river is flowing slow but sure right into the presence of God. In the our little bubbles, though, are lots of troubles. If we looked outside, and we could because the bubble is clear, we'd see the river, and where it is going, and be encouraged. But we don't look outside.

Thanking God and praising God is looking outside the bubble of trouble. But it will normally be work. Don't be surprised. May we nevertheless tell the Lord that he is worthy of thanks.

It is a healer, a mind and soul healer. It brings light into our darkness every time. The troubles are not gone, but there is light and hope and perspective. On our own we don't see what's outside the bubble of trouble. We don't see it until we thank and praise God for what he said is out there.

Then we see it, and that is our healing. We don't do it thank and praise God, though, to be healed. We thank and praise him because he is worthy, and that's how the relationship works.

It is joyful exuberance. Sometimes we get it, we see it, and we're delighted, and we tell God, and praise is not work or duty, we can't not thank and praise him.

Thank God for the things that the world cannot take away, things beyond our circumstances. It is a duty, it is labour, it is a healer, and it is also joy and praise that pours out.

PRAYER: God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
Thank you for blessing us in Christ with every spiritual blessing you could give.
Thank you for choosing us in Christ before world began.
Thank you for aiming us back then, in your love, at being adopted by you.
Thank you for buying us for yourself; you bought us and paid for us by the blood of Christ.
Thank you for showing us your big plan, to bring heaven and earth under the Lord's rule.
Thank you for choosing Jewish believers first, keeping old promises, for the praise of your glory.
Thank you for including us Gentile believers in Christ, and giving us the Holy Spirit.
Thank you for calling us into the hope of your great blessing.
Thank you for the riches of the glorious inheritance that's waiting for us.
Thank you for your great power, that brings us from where we are today into that inheritance.
Thank you that nothing on earth can take any of these from us. Amen.