

## “What’s so Great About Being a Christian?”

Ephesians 1:3-14

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When my brothers and I were growing up our parent sometimes told us, “You guys are so lucky to live on a farm. Those kids who live in town are bored most of the summer. In the country there is lots of space, lots of things to do and you get to work in the hayfield.” My response was, “Yah, right. What is so great about bailing hay when it is 90 degrees out? What is so great about being on a farm?” My mom and dad were never able to convince me that farm life was all that great. I always thought they exaggerated the benefits, now, I know some of you love farm life and that is wonderful. My appreciation of farm life has grown over the years. But I am still not sure it is as great as my parents told me it was, and thus have not lived on a farm since 1976.

In a similar way, some of you probably think I exaggerate the benefits of Christianity and kind of oversell it. For example, you hear this quote from A. W. Tozer, “The only thing that matters in life is knowing Jesus Christ” and think, “Really? Yes, it is nice to be a Christian, but isn’t that a little extreme? I mean, I’m a Christian, but there are other things that are important too. I would like to be successful in my career. I want to get married and have a family. I want my kids to do well in school. I want to save plenty of money for retirement. I want to stay in shape and enjoy good health. I just cannot buy the idea that Christianity is the only thing that is important.”

Now, I want to be clear, there is nothing wrong with any of these other goals. Yet, I agree with Tozer: compared with being a Christian, compared to knowing Jesus Christ, these other things just are not very significant. If you have a relationship with Jesus Christ, it doesn’t really matter whether you are driving a brand new SUV or a 20-year old Volkswagen, whether you just completed your G.E.D. or you are working on your Master’s Degree. What really matters is whether you are trusting and following Jesus Christ and helping others do the same. “Oh, but Pastor Dan, you are a pastor. You are supposed to say Christianity is the greatest thing there is. You are kind of a salesman for the faith and I expect you to exaggerate the benefits of being a Christian.” Yes, salesmen often do that. At the appliance store you may hear, if you buy this washing

machine “doing laundry will not be work, it will be fun.” Most folks don’t take that claim very seriously, but if the new washing machine works better than the old one they are usually satisfied. Yet, when I say “knowing and serving Jesus Christ is the greatest experience in the world,” I don’t think I am exaggerating. I am convinced all of us, at least at times, undervalue Christianity. We don’t realize how great it is to be a Christian.

Today as we really begin our journey through the book of Ephesians, we will explore chapter 1:3-14. As we read this passage, it is obvious that the apostle Paul is excited about Christianity. The Greek text in which Paul wrote, these 12 verses, 200 words form one long, very complex sentence. It almost seems as if Paul gets a little carried away. One commentary says, “these verses are like a snowball rolling down the hill, going faster and getting bigger each second.” As Paul writes about how God has blessed us and extols the benefits of being a Christian it seems he finds it difficult to stop. For the apostle Paul, knowing Jesus Christ was clearly the greatest thing he could ever imagine. Friends, today my hope is that the Lord would use His word to remind us of the marvelous benefits of knowing Jesus, and to help us better realize how great it is to be a Christian. Let’s pause and pray that would happen today.

So what kind of benefits do Christians enjoy? Well we often enjoy physical and material blessings from the Lord. Christian, like the Vulcans on Star Trek used to say often, “Live long and prosper.” Especially, in the Old Testament God frequently demonstrated His grace and favor to His people through physical blessings. Many Old Testament saints were healthy and wealthy people. I think Christians who live godly lives and obey God’s laws will often be successful and have a long prosperous life. A person who treats his/her body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, as God tells us to do in 1 Corinthians 6, will usually experience physical benefits. Various studies have found that people who go to church regularly are, on average, healthier than those who don’t. One reason is that we use less alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs. The one bad habit Christians seem to struggle with is overeating. The more often someone goes to church, the more likely that

person is to be overweight. Too many potluck meals, I guess. We will save that topic for another day. In general, however, Christians are healthier than those who are not believers. Also, wisely using and saving money as the bible commands often leads to a degree of wealth. A few years ago a Christian college in Missouri received a gift of a million dollars from a janitor who had saved and invested a large portion of his modest paycheck each month. Christians often do live long and prosper.

But not always. There is no guarantee that a Christian will experience physical blessings. There is no promise that someone who follows Christ will attain financial security, get a good report on a medical checkup or make the "A" honor roll. In fact, the bible makes it clear that believers in Jesus will face trials and difficulties in life. Now some folks adopt what I call a "fairy tale Christianity." They think, "If I turn to Jesus, then I will just live happily ever after." Folks, that is not the case. Christians are not immune to tragedy. Yes, in the book of Exodus some of the plagues hit only the Egyptians and not the Israelites. That, however, is not the norm. When Hurricane Ida hit New Orleans last month, Christians as well as non-Christians lost their homes. This next week, biopsies will show cancer cells in followers of Jesus, as well as in atheists. If a drunk driver kills an innocent pedestrian, that victim could be a pagan, or it might be a devout Christian.

Friends, I am convinced the teaching that believers in Jesus are or should be immune from adversity is very destructive. When tragedy strikes someone who believes that, as it often does, it may cause a crisis of faith. This person often starts to doubt the truth of Christianity. He or she might think, "Well, I guess God doesn't really love me, since He let my house burn down." Or maybe that person will experience unbearable guilt, unjustified guilt, assuming bad things that happen in life must be punishment from God. Some parents who learn their little boy has downs syndrome assume it is their fault because God is punishing them for something. They forget that God most often uses adversity not to punish us, but to strengthen our soul, build our character and grow our love.

But, Pastor Dan, if being a Christian doesn't guarantee physical and material benefits, then

what is so great about being a Christian? Well, in our text the apostle tells us we have every spiritual blessing. Now, these are not primarily promises of future blessings. That is something to which we do look forward. We are promised a better country, an eternal home, where there is Revelation 21:4, no more death, mourning, crying or pain. In this passage, however, Paul is speaking of blessings or benefits Christians can enjoy right now, today. **Ephesians 1:3 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.** These blessings are spiritual in a least two ways. First, they come through and are experienced through the Holy Spirit. Second, they are spiritual, not physical or material. In the next verse Paul mentions some of these blessings, though he certainly does not give an exhaustive list. As Christians, I think we enjoy more spiritual blessings than we can ever imagine. One of the benefits Paul writes about in this text is predestination, being chosen by God. We are not going to ignore that, but I am going to save it for next week when we can have a little more time to explore this sometimes controversial and often misunderstood blessing. This morning we will focus on four spiritual blessings Paul says we as Christians experience.

**First, we are God's adopted children. Ephesian 1:5,6a He predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace.** This is the foundation of all our spiritual blessings. God, who is creator and Lord of the universe, is our father. We adopted two of our four sons, Brock and Brett. That gives me a glimpse, as a dad, of the delight our heavenly father takes in bringing us into His family. Now, some folks are uncomfortable with this analogy because they have had a negative experience with their human father. Yet, we should think of the best father we could ever imagine. Maybe it is a father on TV...I always thought Bonanza's Ben Cartwright was a great dad. Or maybe it is a friend's father who always seemed so caring and you wished your own dad was more like. Or maybe your own dad is the best father you can imagine. Then multiply that best father by 1000 and you still will fall short of what our heavenly father is like. J. I. Packer said, "If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much they make of the

thought of being God's child and having God as their father." Friends, nothing can give us more security than knowing that Sovereign of the universe is our father.

The **second** blessing mentioned in this passage is that our sins are forgiven. **Ephesians 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.** This verse is bursting with joy because forgiveness is one of the basic needs we as human beings have. Guilt and shame can be emotionally and spiritually crippling. The noted psychiatrist Karl Menninger once said, "If we could find a cure for guilt, most psych wards would be empty." Now, people often try to ignore or deny the guilt they feel. Some claim their repressive religious upbringing is the cause for these unpleasant feelings. For example, a man who breaks his marriage vows may try to convince himself he has done nothing wrong, that he has a right to be happy, and the only reason he feels guilty is because he went to a fundamentalist church when he was growing up. Another problem is that those who counsel others, whether it is a therapist, pastor or just a friend, are often dismissive of guilt. For example, if your friend Natalie is in a conflict with her mother-in-law, you may try to console her by saying, "It is not your fault." And highlighting the flaws of the other person. That is what a good friend does, right? However, the reality is that Natalie is guilty of words, attitudes or actions that have been destructive in the relationship. The conflict is not all her fault, but she has contributed and it is a good thing if she feels guilty about that.

Rather than help people ignore their guilt, we need to help them deal with it. And the best way to do that is through Jesus. Through His death, through shedding His blood, Jesus has paid the penalty for our sin. Instead of ignoring guilt, Christians need to apply the forgiveness that God provides through Jesus. We need to practice **1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.** What a tremendous promise. The hymn writer hit the nail on the head when he wrote, "My sin, oh the joy of this glorious thought, my sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, oh my soul." Friends, it is great to be forgiven. It is great to be a Christian.

The **third** spiritual blessing is that as Christians we are trophies of God's grace. **Ephesians 1:12 So that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.** "The praise of His glory," Paul uses that phrase three times in this paragraph or sentence. We have the privilege of demonstrating God's grace to the world. One of my favorite musicals is "My Fair Lady." In it, Professor Henry Higgins finds Eliza Doolittle selling flowers on the street, takes her home and teaches her to "walk and talk like a regular lady." Higgins' friends are amazed at his ability to transform this totally unsophisticated girl into a true lady. Folks, in much the same way, other people and the angels themselves, are amazed when they look at us and see how God is transforming sinners into saints. I can almost hear the angels saying, "There is that guy, Bill. He wanted nothing to do with God, and now he loves to go to church and worship the Lord. Or there is Amanda. That woman was so self-centered. She was always trying to use other people, but now she focuses on serving others." Friends, if we are trusting and following Jesus, then our lives reflect the marvelous work God has done and we are trophies of His grace.

But why is that such a blessing for us? It brings glory to God, but how does this help us? Well all of us want to do something meaningful and significant. The Soviet communists used to break a prisoner by having him dig a hole and fill it up, over and over again. The endless repetition of a meaningless task would cause a psychological breakdown in a perfectly normal prisoner, which gave the communists an excuse to keep him locked up. Friends, we all want a career, job or hobby that has a purpose of some type. As Christians, we have the greatest most significant job in the world, we are to show people how great God is. Our lives are to testify of His glorious grace. That is a wonderful reason to live.

The **fourth** blessing that we have is the Holy Spirit. **Ephesians 1:13, 14 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 acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.** Friends, this is marvelous. God's spirit, the third person of the trinity, indwells believers in Jesus. Now, Paul could write ten chapters on the

benefits of having the Holy Spirit, but here he focuses on just one. The Holy Spirit is a down payment, a deposit, a promise, a guarantee, of what God will give us in the future. If I tell a car dealer I would like to buy a particular vehicle, he may say, "Well if you give me \$300 as a down payment, I will hold it for you." That \$300 is my promise that I really will buy that car. The Holy Spirit is God's promise that says no matter how good it is to be a Christian today, it will get better. Though it is great now, the bulk of the blessings will not be received in this life. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that when Jesus returns and the resurrection of all believers occurs, that is when things will really be great. Each Christian will receive a new glorified body, which will never wear out, never experience pain, and never get tired.

Friends, 1 Corinthians 2:9 tells us we can imagine how great it will be. Having that hope makes it great to be a Christian right now, today. No matter what we are going through, no matter how hard of a situation we face, we always have hope. Friends, if you have the Holy Spirit in your life, as every genuine Christian does, that is a down payment from God Himself. Rather than worrying about the future, we can be confident that great things are ahead.

What should our response be to the great blessings God offer us in Jesus Christ?

**First**, if you are not trusting in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you do not know how great it is to be a Christian. You would not know until you become a Christian. Friends, Christianity is much more attractive on the inside than it is from the outside. Being a Christian is ultimately better than what anyone thought it would be. So, if you are not a believer in Jesus, my hope is that, as God's spirit enables, you will turn to Him, even today, and receive God's grace through Jesus Christ. Friends, if you are not sure what that means, make sure you talk to me later.

**Second**, for those of us who are Christians, we should be grateful and thankful for every spiritual blessing we have in Jesus Christ. Rather than grumble about the weather, complaining about your boss, moaning about your aches and pains, or griping about the people you think have wronged you, you need to be praising God for adopting you as His child, for forgiving your sins, and for

making you a trophy of His grace, and giving you the Holy Spirit. That can be your assignment for this week, gratitude instead of grumbling. And let me close with another challenge. If you are a believer in Jesus, be content with being a Christian. Realize how wonderful it is and stop striving to be something else. If your number one goal in life is to become rich, give it up. Make it your priority to love and serve Jesus, because the spiritual blessings you have in Christ are better than having more money than Warren Buffet. If your number one goal is to be popular and have a lot of friends, give it up. Having God's approval is far more important than the approval of your peers. If your number one goal is success in your career, give it up. It is better to be a faithful servant of the Lord, than it is to be the best at whatever job you have. If your number one goal is to have fun and excitement in life, give it up. True joy, lasting joy, comes only when we trust and follow Jesus Christ.

Friends, are you getting the point? It is not that those other things are wrong, but they must not be the focus of our lives. It is foolish to make anything else our number one goal, because the greatest thing in life is to know, love, and serve the Lord Jesus. **Ephesians 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed up in Christ with every spiritual blessing.**