

The God who gives more than we imagine

Ephesians 1:3-14

When was the last time you gave someone a standing ovation?
Perhaps it was at a concert or maybe at a school speech night.

I find that when it comes to standing ovations,
there is always a slightly nerve-wracking moment
when you're not sure if people are going to stand.
If you're the one to start a standing ovation,
then you're taking a bit of a risk as to whether people will join you.

I remember being with a group of professional people in the city
when one person stood up and made a speech
in honor of an executive who was present and about to retire.
At the end of the speech everyone broke into spontaneous applause,
which was a nice moment,
and so the man giving the speech motioned for everyone to stand up,
but no-one did! It was very awkward.

I wonder whether you have ever found yourself standing and applauding alone,
or maybe you've been one of the ones to stay seated, I don't know!

What we have in Ephesians 1:3-14 is Paul's standing ovation for the God we worship.
Scholars have come up with many analogies
to try and describe what Paul is doing in these verses:
his thoughts are a racehorse at full speed, a snowball tumbling down a hill.
The image that comes to me is a *standing ovation* for God.
The question is whether we are leaving Paul to stand on his own.
Do we share his enthusiasm in praising God for all he's done?

The reason I ask is because I myself have found it hard to join in at times.
I've often struggled to feel the same sense of excitement that Paul feels.
The problem for me comes right at the beginning of the passage,
Have a listen to verse 3: 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.
He speaks of *spiritual* blessings, that find their place in the *heavenly* realms.

I find myself thinking:
"I'd much rather physical blessings, in the earthly realm!
Blessings of health, blessings of wealth,
that's the kind of stuff that would get me on my feet and applauding."

It's a bit of a sad way of thinking for a number of reasons.
One, as a citizen of one of the wealthiest countries on earth,
I am the recipient of physical blessings in the earthly realm;

I have received much more than many others, Shame on me if I forget that.

Secondly, it indicates that I'm out of step with the Apostle Paul.
Last week we were reminded of how important it is to have an apostolic faith,
a faith that's *in line with* and *informed by* the apostles,
and so if for some reason I'm not feeling what Paul is feeling
then perhaps that's an indication that there's some work to do.

So what I'd like to do is to explore why these blessings are worth celebrating;
to find some motivation for joining Paul as he praises God.

Now reading through these verses

I can see at least six blessings that have led Paul to break out in praise,
The first being there in verse 4.
For he chose us in him before the creation of the world *to be holy and blameless* in his sight.
The first blessing is that God has chosen us to be holy and blameless.
Now why is being holy and blameless a blessing?
Some people might think it would be more fun to be sinful and guilty!

The benefit of being holy and blameless is spelt out in one of the OT Psalms

In Psalm 24 King David asks the question
Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?
And then he provides the answer: The one who has clean hands and a pure heart.

David tells us that the place where we meet God is holy;
it's distinct from all other places. How so?
From the nature of David's answer it would seem that it's a place
suitable only for those with a clean record and who are pure on the inside.

And so here we see the benefit of this first blessing;
because we are holy and blameless we are free to enter into God's presence.

In my line of work I hardly ever do any travel outside the local area,
But some of you may catch planes to various places and you may do it often.
I once caught a plane with a friend who was a member of an airline lounge.
These are the modern day equivalent to the holy and holies,
you cant just walk in there,
 you have to have a membership,
 you have to have a card.
And so we walked up together and he pointed to me and said "I have a guest".
The woman at the door swiped the card and said to my friend
"welcome back Mr Jeffery" and she looked at me and "welcome ... sir".
Much better than being shut out having to wait at the gate.

And friends, we do not want to find ourselves shut out of God's presence,
especially on the day when the heavenly realm comes down to earth.

But that decision by God to appoint us as holy and blameless,
that's the key that will gain us access to God and what he has in store.

Is that worth praising God for?

It is when we realize that human beings are far from blameless,
and that this action of God to render us blameless is an act of pure grace.
You'll notice in our reading that the blessings come because of God's
generosity:
counted as blameless—with all the benefits that this entails—
even though we're as guilty as all hell.
Pretty amazing stuff.

And so the blessings continue in verse 5.

In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with
his pleasure and will

Adoption is a concept that we probably don't speak enough of in church.

But at a number of points Paul stresses that part of our salvation
is that we are adopted as God's children.

A few of years ago Jas and I were on holidays in NYC,

probably the best holiday we've had in our 10 years of marriage.

One sight that I remember was the adoption truck.

They had this truck that would drive around to different points of the city
and on the back of this truck was a wall of capsules with a puppy in each one.

Kind of like the mobile community pantry that comes here

but instead of groceries they had pets. I'd never seen anything like it.

What they were doing was they were putting the need right in front of people.

I'm not sure it's a great approach because a cute puppy is really hard to resist
and so I felt it encouraged spur-of-the-moment purchasing

which is not what you want when it comes to animals.

But what I can't fault is the desire to see these animals adopted.

We all know what the alternative is and that isn't good,

So for these animals to have a future they needed to find a new home.

God wants us to have a future in his family, and so God has adopted us.

And the benefit of adoption isn't only that we avoid a nasty future,

but it's also that we gain something magnificent.

Just skip forward a moment to verse 14:

Paul speaks of a guaranteed inheritance.

There are great things coming for those who are God's children:

eternal life, including perfect physical health.

These blessings are described as spiritual in the present,

but there is coming a day when the blessings from God *will* be physical;
 Eternal life *will be* a physical reality and it will be glorious!
 Worth praising God for? I think perhaps it is!

Verse 7, and we switch images from the back of a truck full of pets
 to an image that's much darker.

Imagine a platform not with animals available for adoption
 but with enslaved humans available for purchase. Paul writes
 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins,
 in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us.

The concept of redemption comes from the ancient slave market.
 Men and women who were perhaps victims of war
 would be traded as labour for governments and private homes.
 There was a way out though;
 if someone were generous enough to pay what was called a *ransom*,
 then the slave could be *redeemed* and they would be free.

The Bible makes use of this metaphor quite a bit.
 It's our sins that enslave us:
 they drive us towards and condemn us with a pitiful death;
 they keep us from being the people we were created to be;
 and there's no escape from them unless someone acts on our behalf—
 which is exactly what Christ did when he died on the cross.
 His blood was the ransom that redeemed us from this slavery,
 his blood is the agent that enables the forgiveness of sins.
 Without it we have no hope. Is that worth praising God for? You tell me!

And then in verses 8 and 9 we discover that
 the fact we know all this—is itself—an incredible blessing:
 With all wisdom and understanding, Paul writes, he *made known to us* the mystery of his
 will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ,
 It was with the ministry of Jesus
 that the knowledge of what God was doing in the world was finally revealed.

There's a wonderful passage in 1 Peter
 that says that the OT prophets tried to find out
 the exact nature of what Christ's ministry would be like,
 but that the privilege of knowing is actually given to us.
 Even angels long to look into these things, Peter tells us.

My wife Jasmine told our GG a story of when she was a university student,
 watching Oprah Winfrey in the middle of the day
 (because that's what university students do).
 And you may have seen what happens on these chat shows,
 particularly when Oprah Winfrey is involved.

Praise be to God that he predestined us!

And finally, we have another blessing
 that's way to big to deal adequately with as one point out of six.
 We're told half way through verse 13, that when we believed, we were marked in
 him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance
 until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.
 The *Holy Spirit* is a blessing from God; God blesses us *with God*.

Notice that Paul describes the Spirit as a deposit.
 He is more than a promise,
 he is a portion of what we will receive when our full inheritance arrives.
 When you put a deposit on a house or a car or on any loan,
 that's the first payment, it's the first portion of your ownership.
 We have something to enjoy now.

Speaking of kitchens, when I was younger I loved it when mum used to make cakes.
 I loved taking the beaters from the mix-master and slurping up the batter.
 It was raw egg that I was eating but I didn't care, it tasted delicious!
 I was receiving a portion of what was still to come,
 and this is the type of blessing we receive with the Holy Spirit.

In the future we will see and know God face to face,
 but now the Spirit teaches us form God's word and helps us to pray
 In the future we will be made perfect in all things
 But now the Spirit helps us to say no to sin and yes to righteousness
 In the future we will gather with all of God's people in a one perfect community
 But now the Spirit equips us with different abilities so we can serve others.

Praise God that the good things aren't all held off until the age to come.
 Praise God that we can have some of these things in the present.

And you are confident that you can have these blessings, aren't you?
 And you know how to access these blessings, don't you?

You may have noticed that all these blessings are ours 'in Christ',
 that's a repeated phrase throughout this passage.
 And, according to verse 13, we were included in Christ when we heard the
 message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.
 When we hear the message about Jesus and when we believe,
 that's how we find ourselves in Christ,
 and that's how we find ourselves the recipients of all these blessings.
 These are ours to enjoy, and they are ours to praise god for.
 That's Paul's response all the way through these verses, isn't it,
 to applaud God for all he's done.
 Do you want to join him, or is Paul left on his own? I hope you want to join in.