

# The church's core identity

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[ 0 : 00 ] Thank you.

Good morning, Church. This morning's reading is taken from Ephesians 1, verse 1-14. In accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us, 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 reached their fulfillment, to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

In Him we were also 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, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory.

And you 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.

[ 2 : 34 ] This is the word of the Lord. One thing I forgot to mention was for Home Fellowship Group leaders, there is a leaders' briefing after Sunday's service next week, and that's in the notices as well.

You should have a sermon outline, as always, that would help you as we dig deep into the riches of Ephesians chapter 1 this morning. Let's pray for God to show us the riches of who He is.

Heavenly Father, I pray that indeed you would use your word this morning to bring praise to yourself, to help us to see how glorious you are, and how gracious you are, and how good you are. Open our eyes this morning to how incredible the Lord Jesus is. In your son's name we pray. Amen. Who are you?

A male? A female? A West Malaysian? A Sarawakian? A Kayan? A Loon Bawang? A Kayan? A Loon Bawang? A Chinese mix?

[ 3 : 51 ] Who are you? A teacher? A lawyer? A doctor? A hairdresser? A husband or wife?

A son or daughter? A brother or sister? No, no, no, no. That's not what I'm asking. Who are you really? What's your history? Your story?

Where do you see your destiny? Who are you? Well, let me cut to the chase and tell you straight up who you are this morning.

Let me tell you your core identity according to the Bible, according to Ephesians. You are blessed. You are blessed. Oh, you say. That sounds like it will be a really good message today. I like the sound of that.

[ 4 : 50 ] I'm listening now. You are blessed. Now, the word blessed has different meanings to different people, doesn't it? If I'm reading my Facebook news feed correctly and remembering conversations accurately, here's how people see being blessed.

You are blessed because your son got straight A's for UPSR last year. You are blessed because your daughter just got accepted into Cambridge University.

You are blessed because you finally made it to your dream destination. And thank the Lord. The weather stayed amazing all week. You are blessed because you can finally fit into your new clothes after exercising for a long time.

You are blessed because you are feeling good about yourself and your family today. What a blessing. Those could be blessings.

No doubt about that. But there's something that nags me about that picture. You see, I've just recently been hearing about my friend, Marian.

[ 6 : 06 ] Marian's my ex-colleague. She's slightly younger than me and she currently works for Scripture Union in West Malaysia. Now, let me tell you about Marian. She's a Christian and she's amazingly gifted for ministry.

When I preach evangelistically, I'll be very happy if just one person comes and says he'll be more interested to know about Jesus. But when Marian shares the gospel, plenty of hands shoot up to say that they want to believe in Jesus.

That's the kind of person she is. But just this week, she's just gotten her OKU card. Orang kurang upaya.

Why? She's officially considered disabled now because over the past year, she's slowly becoming blind.

And that's not the first time that she's come down with illness. Far from it. Over the few years that I've known her, I've lost count of the number of times that she's had operations for all sorts of things.

[ 7 : 15 ] Bleeding cysts. Digestive problems. Mysterious tumours. Severe migraines. She nearly died once.

And she's constantly in pain now. Often unable to do what she loves to do so much. Teach the Bible. And share about Jesus. Even though she's more than capable, she never got to finish her university degree.

She's never had much money. Or gone on a holiday beyond Langkawi, I believe. Is she blessed? Or did she offend God in some way?

Where's her blessing? And as I look over our congregation this morning, I can guarantee that there will be some who are wondering, how could I possibly be blessed?

My children aren't doing well in school and acting up. My friends in school are giving me the cold shoulder. I've had chronic pain for years, despite plenty of earnest prayers for healing.

[ 8 : 28 ] My spouse and I are drifting apart. I've just moved to Kuching from somewhere else and I miss home. I don't like the way things are done here. I'm having trouble adjusting.

How could I possibly be blessed? The Bible says I'm blessed? That's a joke. But Paul insists, you are blessed.

Just not in the way people usually mean it. As the professor of linguistics, Deborah Tennant observes, while people say, I'm so blessed nowadays, they would have simply said, I'm so lucky in the past.

And some, she observes, simply say, I'm blessed as an indirect way to boast about their lives. But Paul says, I'm talking about something different.

Something richer, something stronger, something firmer, something that will make you explode in praise, no matter what your current life looks like.

[ 9 : 41 ] Because, did you notice, that's how Paul begins his letter? With an explosion of praise. 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.

And what you need to know is that he doesn't stop praising. He goes on and on. It's hidden in your English translations. But did you know that verses 3 to 14, in the original language of the New Testament, is one long sentence?

My nephew was in town recently over Chinese New Year. And he's a real chatterbox. When he speaks, there's no full stops. And for 202 Greek words, Paul has no full stops as he just keeps praising and blessing God.

Our English translations can't keep up. The NIV has to break it up into eight sentences just to make it understandable to us today.

Paul is overflowing with praise. Most scholars today agree that although Paul's letter was sent to the Christians in a city called Ephesus, hence Ephesians, it was likely to have circulated more widely amongst Christians as well in the region around Ephesus.

[ 11 : 20 ] And so Paul wants all Christians, everywhere, at all times, to know God has done something amazing. He has poured out every spiritual blessing in Christ upon the believer.

That's who you are. But what are these blessings Paul talks about? Well, let's go through them one by one.

Firstly, God chose us. Verse 4, For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

I want you to think, when was the last time you planned something only for it to go completely wrong? Maybe you were hoping for a nice weekend at Damai Beach for a romantic getaway or to catch up with friends.

But on the way there, the dark clouds started gathering and the storm erupts just as you're pooling into the car park. So the beach is off limits.

[ 12 : 37 ] You then discover that the resort is undergoing renovations. So they put you up in a much lousier room than the premium suite you paid for where the pipe is leaking, the TV is not working, the bed is half collapsing.

So you sigh and say, oh well, let's go and grab some food only to discover to your horror that you've dropped your wallet somewhere. Before you know it, you and your spouse or your friends are having a massive argument.

Your perfect plans, which you spend months preparing and saving for, have fallen apart. You had a plan, but you had no control over its execution.

Well, that's life in a world like ours, isn't it? We make plans, but we can't control the outcomes.

But God is different. He's never needed to make a contingency plan. He's never had to make an emergency phone call.

[ 13 : 51 ] As Job says to the Lord in the Old Testament, I know that you can do all things. No purposes of yours can be thwarted.

Unlike us, when God makes plans, they come to pass. But here's the incredible thing. From the very beginning of time, God included us in his plans.

He chose us before the world began. He chose us to be with him. Not in a romantic movie kind of way, like when Arwen says to Aragorn in Lord of the Rings, I would rather share one lifetime with you than face all the ages of this world alone.

No, no, no. God choosing us wasn't so cheesy. You see, God did not need our company. He's Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

He's perfectly happy in himself. But that's the Trinity. The Father planned before time that we might come to know him.

[ 15 : 10 ] And then he chose Christ in human time to carry out that plan. And then the Holy Spirit came to make sure we accept this plan and become a part of God's grand design.

And get this, this is very important. He did this in love. That's the last two words of verse 4. God's choice.

You see, there's a danger we can think of God choosing us the same way we choose our leaders in an election. It's very impersonal, isn't it?

We go into the booth, we mark the X on the ballot, and then we come out and forget all about it as we head to the nearest Kopitiam for breakfast. us.

But God didn't choose us that way as if he was marking X on the list of candidates. He did this in love.

[ 16 : 19 ] His love is foundational. It precedes and anchors his choosing. You see, this is how human love works.

We choose something good, perhaps a new gadget, a new restaurant, and then we come to love it. For God, it works the other way around.

He loves something in itself, he chooses it, and then he guides it to the purpose for which it's designed. and he chose a people that in themselves were nothing.

If anything, they were helpless, dirty, and biased against God himself. But God the Father scooped them up in his arms and says, I want to set you apart for myself.

I want to make you shine. I want to turn you like my son, whose beauty and purity are without peer. That's what holy and blameless means.

[ 17 : 38 ] That's the purpose of God's choice. His chosen people, his treasured possession is to be a holy nation.

God's love. You see, predestination, which is the doctrinal term for what I've just been describing, is actually a beautiful thing.

When we hear the word predestination, we normally think of it as something divisive, something unpleasant, a truth that we wish was not there in the Bible.

people. But that's not Paul's reaction. He's praising God for it. He calls it a spiritual blessing. Now, that's not to say that this doctrine doesn't raise some hard questions.

How does it relate to our free will, for instance? And I'm very happy to have an extended discussion with you about it, if you want. In fact, over the last two years, a number of you have had conversations with me about this.

[ 18 : 44 ] But at its heart, I want you to see this. The doctrine of predestination is a spiritual blessing.

Because this doctrine highlights God's grace in its widest dimensions. If God saves me apart from my works, he also chooses me apart from them.

Predestination brings us up close and personal with God's grace. For it shows our inclusion into God's eternal purposes had 100% nothing to do with me and 100% everything to do with his goodness.

That's humbling, isn't it? imagine a door in front of you. On the door is a sign that says, trust in Jesus.

And when you believe, you walk through that door. But now that you're on the inside, you notice the other side of the door. And there's a sign there too.

[ 20 : 01 ] But this time it says, God chose you. and that's why you are blessed. You chose God, it is true. But that's because God chose you first.

And that's just the first blessing. Because in choosing us, God intends to give us an even higher privilege. That's the next blessing.

Secondly, God adopted us. God adopted us. Verse 5. In love, he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will.

To get the significance of this, let me explain to you first century Roman culture. Ephesus, after all, was part of the Roman Empire. And for them, children were a problem.

There were too many mouths to feed. So the best solution? Leave the kids to die. Literally dump them in the trash heap.

[ 21 : 16 ] Especially girls, since they were an economic liability. After all, if she got married later in life, you have to pay the dowry. And if you were picked up but fell into the wrong hands, that could be a total disaster.

There was a possibility you could be used as child prostitutes. Now, someone could come and adopt you. They'll look at you and wonder if you would bring honour to their family name and line. And if they saw any perceived imperfections, any blemishes on you, they could drop you back, no problem.

Leave you back in the trash, exposed to the harsh weather. Walk away. That's how it was. And when verse 5 was being read to the Ephesian church, it was very likely there would be some present who had experienced this.

They had been dumped at birth. But Paul says, look at our God. In the Old Testament, he adopted wayward Israel as his son.

[ 22 : 41 ] That's what Exodus 4 22-23 says. He adopted wayward kings as his sons. That's how King David, for example, is sometimes described as his son.

And now, in Christ, in love, he adopts us as his sons and daughters. In Roman times, it was only the father, not both parents, who could take the initiative in adopting a son.

God the father has taken the initiative to predestine us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will.

He didn't do so on the condition that we somehow bring him on earth us. He did so on the basis of his own redeeming love.

He chose to bless those who are weak, who are nothing, who are in fact hostile to him. He could have taken one look at us and justifiably walk away.

[ 23 : 55 ] And yet, through Christ, he looks at us, cries out with pleasure and says to us, you belong with me.

And that should become the most defining moment in a Christian's life. Put yourself in the shoes of those efficient Christians. It's no longer about who dumped you.

It's about who took you in. God the father himself who delights in you, who sings over you, who holds you tenderly and securely in his arms, and who washes away your every stain today and forever.

This is your defining moment. This morning, perhaps something has broken you. The lack and loss of relationships.

The way your body refuses to cooperate. Hopes and dreams that will dash. But they no longer define you.

[ 25 : 10 ] The pain might not go away. The circumstances might never change. But they don't define you. When you realize who took you in, who's holding you now, who's making you new, you know blessed beyond compare.

And in Christ, you can be sure that God is at work through your circumstances now, so that you begin to resemble the family likeness.

Because he calls you his son, he wants to make you look like the son of God. your circumstances might never be what the world calls blessed or lucky.

But when God is your father and Jesus calls you his brother and sister, you can be sure he is working for the greater good of your soul.

Wow. And yet we're not even quite halfway through Paul's list of blessings.

[ 26 : 26 ] So let's keep going. Thirdly, God redeem us. Verse 7. In him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.

Sometimes we use the word salvation, redemption, and forgiveness interchangeably, as if all of them had exactly the same meaning. But they don't. Redemption, you see, is commercial language. More precisely, it's about paying a ransom price so that the slave can go free. Paul is saying, in Christ, it's like the exodus happening all over again.

The slaves go free. There's a radical change in status for his people. It's not that we've improved our spiritual status from spiritual middle class to spiritual upper middle class.

It's more that our status is now completely opposite to what we were before. You see, what were we before? We were slaves.

[ 27 : 41 ] people and not just to external forces. Ephesians will mention that there are indeed external evil forces at work later on. But we can't simply shift the blame to the devil.

For we were willing slaves to sin. We were ready to serve this master. when we come to chapter 2 later on, Paul will elaborate more.

But the point is this. It's an internal issue, not an external one. In our very being, we are wretched sinners.

the Baptist preacher C.H. Spurgeon once said, you cannot slander human nature because we are so bad. Now, if we're honest, we have a hard time believing this.

Sure, we sin. Sure, we make mistakes, but it's not such a big deal, is it? But when we think like that, we've misunderstood the nature of God.

[ 28 : 49 ] Remember how big he is? He can plan and execute things perfectly even before the world has begun. That's a big God. And his bigness includes his holiness.

Habakkuk 1, for instance, says that he is so pure, he cannot tolerate any wrong. So, although we might not think it, that means God cannot tolerate us in our condition post-garden of Eden.

We need redemption. We need forgiveness. But here's the incredible thing. God wants to give it so that we can be his children.

Today, if we were to adopt someone, it would be a long and costly process. For God, it was even more costly. it required the blood of his son.

But he did it. Not with a sigh or with a groan. He didn't go, ayah, wasting my redemption points on things like you.

[ 30 : 06 ] No. The members of the Trinity conspired together for the father to give up his beloved son to make you via his spirit, his sons and daughters.

Read verse 7 again. 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.

and the abundance of his amazing grace is something we can only comprehend when we first see how wretched we were.

If we don't, we'll just be like the toddler who doesn't understand that the piece of paper he's holding in his hands is actually a check for one million dollars.

It's only when we see the darkness of the skies that we understand the glory of the stars. And it is only when we see the darkness of our own hearts that we understand the glorious riches of the gospel.

[ 31 : 19 ] Fourthly, God made known his master plan to us. Verses 9, 10. 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.

Here is yet another blessing. We know the future. that's something people want, isn't it? That's why people pay good money to consultants who can predict the trends of the stock market.

Why people are still willing to go to BOMOS and fortune tellers and so on. they think they have the secrets. Well, Paul says, no need to go to them.

The secret of the gospel is now public knowledge. The gospel is God's master plan and it tells us where history is heading, towards a time when Jesus will be proclaimed Lord over everything.

God's God's name. He's going to unite all things. That's what verse 10 is getting at. The chaos present in this universe will finally be brought back to order.

[ 32 : 51 ] All things on heaven and on earth will be brought under the headship of Christ. Indeed, it will find its ultimate meaning in him.

And so we can be at rest. God may seem silent for a time, but we don't have to worry because he's already told us his master plan.

Even if he hasn't told us exactly how all the details of our lives fit into it. So while we might wonder, why has God not healed me?

Why has God not brought this to pass? Why has that happened? We can be at rest because we know that this is all part of his master plan to see all things come under Christ.

And because you are in Christ, you know you are part of his master plan. And by the way, this isn't just about you as an individual, but we as a church.

[ 34 : 00 ] We are part of this master plan as we will see more clearly when we get to chapters 2 and 3. But that means we can trust him right now and keep living life under Christ's command.

Fifthly, God assures us via his Holy Spirit. Verse 11, in him we were also 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 who were the first to put our hope in Christ might be for the praise of his glory.

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believe, you will mark 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.

God just can't stop giving. As if being chosen wasn't enough, as if being adopted, redeemed, and given revelation wasn't enough, God now gives us his Holy Spirit as a seal.

Seal is a property word. It speaks of ownership. When you stamp a document with a seal, for instance, you are saying it belongs to you. And Paul is saying here that we have been sealed as a people belonging to God.

[ 35 : 41 ] And that seal is the Holy Spirit himself. That would have been great reassurance to the Christians who were not Jews. They belong to God just as much as the Jewish Christians did.

And this seal was given, verse 13, when they first heard and trusted in the gospel. This is a spiritual blessing all Christians have, not just some.

The Holy Spirit assures us we are God's possession and inheritance. And the Holy Spirit is not just a seal, he's a guarantee.

he's like a deposit, a down payment that ensures that we will enjoy the full privileges of what has been paid for. We are redeemed now, but we have the full redemption of our bodies only when Jesus returns.

And when we have our new bodies, we can truly enjoy being God's children because we'll fully be in his presence. As Billy Graham, who died just a few days ago, said, you probably saw this quote, someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead.

[ 36 : 59 ] Don't you believe a word of it? I shall be more alive than I am now. I will have just changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God. And because we have the same Holy Spirit as Billy Graham, we can have the same assurance as him.

so there you have it. One long sentence in which Paul lists and can't stop praising God for all the blessings he has.

But I hope that as we made our way through the list, you notice one other thing that Paul cannot stop repeating. It's there throughout. 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.

Verse 4, he chose us in him. Verse 5, he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Christ. Verse 6, he has freely given us in the one he loves.

In other words, in Christ. Verse 7, in him we have redemption. Verse 11, in him we were also chosen. I could go on and on but I think you'll get the point. All of these spiritual blessings are found in one source and one source only, Christ himself.

[ 38 : 23 ] Who are you? You are blessed only because you are in Christ. I wonder if you know him.

I'm not asking whether you come to church every week or whether you answer Christian when people ask what's your religion. I'm asking whether you know him.

If you don't, your children might get straight A's, your health might be perfect now, your life might look like a pleasant dream, but you have no blessing because God is not your father.

He's your prosecutor. And we should take to heart the words of the theologian J.I. Packer. He once wrote this on the screen.

If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child and having God as his father.

[ 39 : 31 ] If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.

So church, does knowing God as your father and yourself as his child shape your entire outlook? Does it shape your very definition of blessing?

If it doesn't, this might come as a shock to you, but that means you haven't quite gotten what being a Christian is all about just yet. Look again at Paul.

Look at how knowing God the father moves him to praise in verse 3 and 6 and 12 and 14. To the praise of his glorious grace, for the praise of his glory, to the praise of his glory, he keeps saying, because he knows God the father who blesses, chooses, predestines, redeems, forgives, lavishes, reveals, and urges.

And that's why in the New Testament, whenever we encounter the word blessed or blessing, it's actually so different to the world's ideas, and perhaps even some churches.

[ 41 : 01 ] Let me just give you a sample, it's all on the screen. Here's Jesus. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the earth is the kingdom of heaven. Here's Jesus again.

Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you, and reject your name as evil because of the son of man. Here's Paul quoting David.

Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Here's James.

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

And here's Peter. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

You get the idea. We are blessed not because life is so good, but because God is so good. We are blessed because we have spiritual blessings of Ephesians 1 if we are in Christ.

[ 42 : 16 ] We don't have to go to the blessings as the world defines it. Well, as I finish, let me go back to my friend, Marian. Despite her ongoing trials, she is one of the most blessed people that I know because she really, truly has a life relationship with God the Father.

Her life motto is from Philipians 1 verse 21, for to me to live is Christ, to die is gay. Her identity is solidly rooted in Christ.

Brothers and sisters, who are you? let's find our identity and hence our blessing in Christ alone. Amen. Amen.