

God's Purpose

A Sermon by Stephen Taylor

I was once told at Bible College that it was good to have a memorable opening to a sermon, something shocking that would arrest the listener right from the word go. If I was to say 'I'm going to show you my six pack' that would be a truly shocking start so you'll be relieved to know that is not my intention. But in a sense I am going to show you a six pack this morning, nothing to do with me, I'm just the messenger, but six wonderful things that God has done for His people in a passage packed with so much more.

John Stott, in his commentary on Ephesians which I suspect we'll be revisiting a number of times in this series, said that verses, 3-14, constitute a single sentence in the original Greek. It has been described in all sorts of colourful ways, from 'a golden chain of many links' to 'a kaleidoscope of dazzling lights and shifting colours' 'a snowball tumbling down a hill, picking up volume as it descends', and, somewhat less positively, as 'a long-winded racehorse ... catering onwards at full speed'. If I can add my own colourful illustration, I would compare the next few minutes to a day at Alton Towers – you know you're not going to get through everything, and it might be quite tiring, but you're not here very often so you have to make the most of it so hold on for the ride.' You're going to develop this now in your mind, but please refrain from doing so! So with so much to talk about, let's go straight into no. 1: He has blessed us. To quote John Stott again:

He begins by blessing God for blessing us with every conceivable blessing.

Not only do I not have a six pack to show you this morning, but, in a song you may have heard a few times, 'I'm nothing special, in fact I'm a bit of a bore, if I tell a joke you've probably heard it before.' But although we may be ordinary, unremarkable people, we are blessed by an extraordinary God who has done some remarkable things for us as Christians.

He has blessed us, not just in the earthly realm with food to eat, homes to live in, friends to love and comforts to enjoy, but in the heavenly realm with every spiritual blessing in Christ. This expression 'heavenly realm' occurs five times in this letter and nowhere else in Paul's other epistles. Just as Abraham was challenged to count the stars I would challenge you to count your blessings, and whilst we're quoting songs let's do this one: count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done. There used to be a make of bread called Sunblest; well we are blessed by the Son – S-o-n. In the first fourteen verses of this letter Jesus is mentioned by name, title or pronoun fifteen times, and the phrase 'in Christ' or 'in Him' no fewer than eleven times. We'll be returning to this phrase a number of times during this letter. But we are not only blessed by the Son but by the Father as well, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The same God who blessed Abraham all those years ago. The God of Abraham praise – there's another song – and there's so much to praise Him for.

Paul goes on in this breathless passage to unpack these blessings, naming them one by one. The second one is this: He has chosen us. This is one of the blessings of being God's people – we are chosen by Him, and this choice is not some last minute decision but a choice made before the creation of the world. Now that is going back a bit. If I was on a football team in school it wasn't because I was chosen but because I was put there to make the up the numbers. It could be something to do with my lack of ability to play football.

But if we're Christians here this morning we're not chosen because of any of our abilities, our personality, our sense of humour, our bank balance or indeed our six pack. How can we be chosen through anything we have done if the choice was made before we were born?

Just imagine if Sir Alf Ramsey was given the power not just to choose the 1966 World Cup team but a 2016 European Championship team with players who wouldn't be born for another 30 years. It would be interesting to hear his thoughts on who was available to him, but probably unwise to quote them. Because He probably wouldn't think there was much of a choice.

But we have a God with the power to choose the right team, not just 50 years in advance but 1000s of years before any of us came along. He knew who the right team would be for this church in 2014, because He doesn't make mistakes. We are chosen in Him, and if the timescale is staggering so is the purpose – to be holy and blameless in His sight.

If you were filling out an application form for a job and you had to list your personal attributes I very much doubt you'd have these two – holy and blameless. At least I hope you wouldn't, because if you did you wouldn't be either. But part of God's purpose in choosing is that that is what you'll become. Last week Daniel focussed at some length on the old body, and we often say as we get older 'I'd like a new body'. As a Christian I'm looking forward to having a new mind. One that is holy and blameless – now that is something to look forward to.

You see we often focus on the first part of this verse, and rightly so because it is extraordinary, but we mustn't forget the end game here - to be holy and blameless in his sight. We can give an impression of being holy and blameless in the sight of other people, but we can't fool God. He knows we're a million miles from where we want to be, let alone where he wants us to be. But that hasn't stopped him choosing us. In fact Paul uses an even stronger word when he says in v5 'he predestined us' to be adopted as his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ. He's chosen us to be part of the family.

To return to our opening analogies I see this passage as box of chocolates. You know when you take off the lid to reveal the contents, you can give an audible 'wow'; there's so much there it's hard to know where to start. What you wouldn't do, at least I hope you wouldn't, is sit there and have them all in one go, although judging from some of your guilty looks I wouldn't put it past you. But the fact is that if you did you wouldn't appreciate the individual

chocolates you were stuffing yourself with, and in the end you would probably be sick.

In the same way you can't possibly appreciate all these blessings in one sitting but I would encourage you to open up the box when you get home and enjoy a couple more every now and then because they will leave a wonderful taste in your mouth.

And the next one is quite chewy because it takes a while to really get through it: 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 with all wisdom and understanding. Each part when broken down is worthy of comment but what caught my eye was 'he has lavished his grace upon us.' Lavish is not a word we use so often nowadays. It speaks of something very extravagant, where no expense is spared and nothing is held back. That describes God's grace for us.

Grace has been described as God's riches at Christ's expense and Paul talks about the riches of God's grace in v7. It's one of the key themes of the whole letter. In future weeks we'll be looking in chapter two at how we are saved by grace, not through anything we have done or could ever do. It's described by Stuart Townend in his song entitled 'Lord I'm grateful' (TD).

Lord, I'm grateful,
Amazed at what You've done.
My finest efforts are filthy rags;
But I'm made righteous
By trusting in the Son:
I have God's riches at Christ's expense.

'Cause it's grace.
There's nothing I can do
To make You love me more,
To make You love me less than You do.
And by faith
I'm standing on this Stone
Of Christ and Christ alone,
Your righteousness is all that I need,
'Cause it's grace.

Called and chosen when I was far away,
You brought me into Your family.
Free, forgiven, my guilt is washed away,
Your loving kindness is life to me.

Grace loves the sinner,
Loves all I am and all I'll ever be;
Makes me a winner
Whatever lies the devil throws at me.
Freely given, but bought with priceless blood,
My life was ransomed at Calvary.
There my Jesus gave everything He could
That I might live for eternity.

So grace is something very special. Now if you were to buy something special you would only buy a small amount. Fudge, to keep the confectionary theme going, is a bit special. You tend to buy it in small amounts on special occasions not least because it can be very expensive. The cost of grace to the one who provided it for us is incalculable and yet it has been lavished upon us. It cost the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ His only Son. It's a price beyond our understanding, and yet the cost has been met and as a result Christians can enjoy the riches of God's grace poured out immeasurably. Redemption, the whole concept of being bought at a price by the Lord who paid the cost of our sin by taking it upon Himself at the cross. In him we have forgiveness of sins, not just in small doses but in accordance with the riches of God's grace, and that's just as well because we keep on sinning. We keep on getting it wrong, through, as the Anglican service book says 'through negligence, through weakness and through our own deliberate fault'.

But God's grace has been lavished upon us, not thrown all over us but given to us with wisdom and understanding. 'My grace' he says, 'is sufficient for you.' We always have enough. As we'll sing in a couple of weeks 'He gives us what we need.'

And we mustn't forget there is a need here. These are not merely fine sounding words from Paul; they are a vital part of God's purpose for our lives. For without the grace of God in our lives we would be utterly hopeless. But there's more to come, for fourthly we see God has made known to us the mystery of His will.

Now when we think of a mystery it can be in the context of a death. An Agatha Christie novel, a murder mystery weekend. But the mystery here is more to do with life, as it's to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment – to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ. (v10).

Paul speaks elsewhere of the 'mystery of godliness' (1 Timothy 3). And in the words of King Nebuchadnezzar, the baddie turned goodie in the book of Daniel said 'Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries. (Daniel 2:47). Trying to grasp what Paul is saying in

verse 10 something of a mystery and the Lord gives us these tantalising glimpses of a glorious future for all who believe and trust in him.

Our fifth element to our six pack is that the Lord has given His Spirit to us. He doesn't just expect us to commit our lives to him and then just leave us to it. We have the promised Holy Spirit, who seals our initial stuttering faith into one with a permanent seal, a mark to assure us that we belong to the Lord.

The Holy Spirit makes the finished work of Christ very real to us. He gives us all the evidence we need when it comes to being confident of our standing before the Lord. Being filled with the Holy Spirit is a theme which we'll return to later in the letter. If you're in any doubt about your ability to make it as a Christian you're in a good starting place. The Lord knows we can't make it in and of ourselves, that's why He gives us his Holy Spirit who assures us of our status in Him. In olden days the seal was the proof of ownership. You knew who the letter was from because the seal of the author was very much in evidence. The Lord Jesus has been described as the 'author of our faith' and His seal, the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, is a sign to others who we belong to, the evidence of the work of God in our experience.

Our sixth and final point follows on from the previous one, that He has guaranteed us our inheritance through His Spirit. In the earthly realm a guarantee can be a precarious one. We can lose it, it can run out, or the terms of it can be so complicated that it's not worth the paper it's written on. My phone was supposed to be under guarantee, so when it went wrong within a year of purchase (you may remember it replaced the one that ended up in an Egyptian swimming pool), I was reasonably confident of it being sorted for free. However on receipt and examination of the phone by the engineers it was not covered by the manufacturer's warranty and subsequently would be quite expensive to repair, they said. I said forget it. Politely.

Other dodgy guarantees are available in the earthly realm which illustrate the point just as well. But the blessings of which Paul speaks in Ephesians 1 are in the heavenly realm, and it's to heaven the Spirit points us with this guarantee of our inheritance. Believing in God's Son, the best is yet to come.

Our trip to Florida back in 2005 was our inheritance from Paula's parents, and very nice it was too. They are both still with us, but the thinking behind the holiday was that my mother-in-law wanted to be around to see us enjoy it, and indeed to share it with us, which is lovely thinking. But believing in God's Son, the best is yet to come. Guaranteed by the Holy Spirit of God who comes to dwell within us when we believe, until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of His glory.

Last weekend I held in my hands photos and medals from the Great War. A picture of my grandfather, no more than a boy really, with two equally youthful looking soldiers destined for the trenches. A bill for a funeral from 1918 for £8. They don't belong to me, and because they were so old I was wary of scanning them or doing anything else electronic with them that may have damaged them. But I held history in my hands and it was quite something.

In a similar way we belong to God. We are His treasured possession. As such we need to look after ourselves spiritually, for we are special in God's sight. 7 and 6 was a lot of money at the time of the artefacts I held in my hand (!) but if you look in Deuteronomy 7:6 you see words which, although originally applied to God's people in Old Testament times, can equally apply to his people today:

⁶For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

⁷The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸But it was because the LORD loved you

There is so much here in Ephesians 1. I would encourage you to go away and digest further the rich fare on offer here, a six pack with so much more besides. For the Lord has blessed us, He has chosen us, He has lavished his grace upon us, He has made known the mystery of his will to us, He has given us his Holy Spirit, and He has guaranteed our inheritance through Him. So much to see, so little time, in the words of a famous chocolatier.

But I have to finish by qualifying the word 'us'. This letter is written to the saints in Ephesus, and relevant for the saints in Leicester, or anywhere else for that matter. I suspect you probably know that the word 'saint' doesn't necessarily mean someone in stained glass but could be any Christian anywhere. If you're a Christian then you're a saint which is a great incentive to start acting like one! But if you're not sure about where you are spiritually I would gently challenge you to give it some thought.

As adverts go Ephesians 1 is a pretty good one for being a Christian. There's so much here to get your teeth into, and we haven't even started the bottom layer yet (that's for next week). I pray that you will taste and see for yourself the goodness of the Lord and that you too will know these spiritual blessings in Christ.