

Title: Mountains of Blessing
Date: January 15, 2023
Subject: Followers of Christ have every spiritual blessing in and through Christ.
Scripture: Ephesians 1:1 - 14

To climb a mountain, people usually begin at the bottom. Depending upon the location and the terrain, a person could climb the face of the mountain... or find an easier way -- drive, gondola or walk is the case with our own Dundee Mountain. It's not as impressive as its namesake in Wyoming which is ten times as tall but because of the surrounding terrain it stands out like a mountain though it's only 1230 feet above sea level and has less than a 200 foot altitude gain. The .9 mile loop is about a 26 minute hike.

I've done the walk up but also been on other mountains including the Canadian Rockies near Banff. To get to the top of Sulphur Mountain I rode the gondola. There were amazing views. One of the surprising sites was a man who reached out his hand to hold the horn of a Big Horn sheep...still attached to the animal. He didn't do it for long as a park ranger informed him that wasn't too smart as it was a wild animal.

When we come to the book of Ephesians, there's no walk up or drive up or gondola ride. It's like taking a helicopter and being dropped off on top of K2 or Mount Everest. It seems like the Lord decided he wanted to take our breath away with the rarified air.

Read Ephesians 1:1 - 14.

To get the full impact of how this section was originally written in the Greek language, I should have taken a deep breath and tried to read vv. 3 - 14 as one sentence in that one breath. I tried and made it about halfway. There are three more long sentences in the book: the second half of chapter 1 (vv. 15 - 23), the first part of chapter 2 (2:1 - 9) and the first part of chapter 3 (3:1 - 7). God can say a lot in one sentence.

I'm going to try to find appropriate mountain names for each passage. Today's is patterned after the mountain with the longest name. It's in New Zealand, has 85 characters and means "the summit where Tamatea, the man with the big knees, the slider, the climber of mountains, the land swallower who travelled about, played his nose flute to his loved one." Even the locals often shorten its name to Taumata or Taumata Hill.

We could call this part of Ephesians Mountains of Blessing and quickly try to list all of the particular blessings that are given but that would become unwieldy. We can simply call it Mountains of Blessing.

Though curiosity makes us want to quickly dig into the particular blessings, we first should focus on the giver of the blessings. Without him there wouldn't be any blessings.

The passage reveals aspects of the character of God - his omniscience, omnipresence, love. Much of the focus is on the attribute of love. Love is mentioned at the end of v. 4 while the related word grace is given in vv. 6 and 8. God is love. He is perfect love. It is the core of how he acts toward people.

What is God's motivation for dispensing blessings? He acts in ways that will give him pleasure as seen in vv. 5 and 9. It's an interesting concept that there are things that please God. We think of gaining pleasure

through things that give us a little tingle or thrill or amusement or happiness. Can we say God gets a tingle, a thrill out of giving spiritual blessings to people?

He has chosen to give blessings (vv. 4, 11). The word predestined also points to his choosing (vv. 5, 11). God had a plan and operated according to it. He was determined to do so. He is consistent and works out things in conformity with his will. He gives of his own free will (v. 11). God isn't a greedy miser who withholds but is wealthy benefactor who delights in giving away out of his riches. God wasn't coerced into giving. No one held a gun to his head to make him give and keep giving more and more and more and more.

God's choice took place before time came into being. It points to his eternity. He has always existed. Jean brought this up Thursday at breakfast about how it's easier to think about eternity future, that things can keep going on, but eternity past, that God was around before things had a beginning? It's something that's incomprehensible to us. We take it by faith.

John Stott tries to bring together God's eternity with our experience: "God put us in Christ together in his mind. He determined to make us (who did not yet exist) his own children through the redeeming work of Christ (which had not yet taken place)."

How are these blessings delivered? The key is the two-word phrase "in Christ." This phrase and similar expressions are found a dozen times in this opening section with more in the rest of the book. It signifies those who've come to God the Father through Jesus Christ to become rightly related with him. The person who is in Christ possesses them. The person who isn't in Christ doesn't have them.

Another phrase we need to clarify is in v. 3: "the heavenly realms." This phrase is used throughout the book. It's different from the material, physical dimension of time and space. It's immaterial as it possesses a different substance. It isn't exactly the same as heaven. It refers to the heavenly kingdom, the spiritual kingdom which focuses on the ultimate realities. The operations of the heavenly realms are present and active in the current expression of life but the blessings will ultimately be fulfilled in the future.

How do these blessings affect us now? It's great to have promises for the future but what about Monday? Or next year? Or "When the dog bites, When the bee stings, When I'm feeling sad."

Those words come from the song "My Favorite Things" in the movie *The Sound of Music* which took place in the Alpine mountains of Austria and Switzerland. Maria comforts the children who are scared by a thunderstorm. She says that when anything bothers her and she feels unhappy, she just tries to think of nice things. Then she launches into the song which recounts a whole bunch of "nice things." She and the family needed more than "rain drops on roses and whiskers on kittens" when the Nazis came calling.

We need more than thinking positive thoughts, cuddling up with warm memories or remembering a few of our favorite things to make it through this present existence of life on earth. We need something solid and substantial even though they can't be seen with the eyes or felt with the hands.

We come to the spiritual blessings, the divine benefits, the expressions of God's favor. They aren't material blessings. The Bible doesn't say God will give us lots of money.

What do we receive? V. 3 declares “every spiritual blessing in Christ.” The Lord could’ve stopped there and not had Paul write any more. We’d think, “That's nice. We have every blessing...I wonder what they are.”

“Every blessing” does provide an answer and a degree of satisfaction. However, as usual, we still want more specificity. Children like to hear they’re loved but are also interested in seeing specifics about how love is practiced - warm place to stay, food to eat, hugs, time spent reading books, etc. That's more fulfilling and satisfying.

Similarly, the specific spiritual blessings make God’s “I love you” more tangible. One source lists 26 blessings in the first three chapters (What Does God Think of Me Now?, Radio Bible Class, P. 4). And then there are more in the final three chapters.

V. 4. Chosen to be holy and blameless. Makes you feel pretty special doesn't it? To be chosen by God? God had an option. He didn't have to pick anyone and yet he did. The great thing about God's choosing is there's no pecking order. It wasn't like the playground where captains pick people they like or think will perform well because of size, age or ability and some aren't picked until the last. Sometimes that created a sense of being unwanted.

God doesn't play favorites in the sense he doesn't pick based on size, age, ability, etc. He wants all. God does play favorites in the sense not all will receive his spiritual blessings because they don't respond to his offer.

The Lord looked out from the vastness of eternity past, before he created anything, saw through what we call centuries and millennia of time, and chose you and me. We want to think of it as individual choosing. That's part of it because we help to comprise the “you” plural of the text. We can be grateful we're an individual who is part of the ones God has chosen. This should make us feel happy.

God chooses for a purpose. His people are to be holy and blameless in his sight. God didn't choose us with the purpose of leaving us the way we were. Holiness means to be set apart and be whole (w-h-o-l-e) which is without holes. Ray Stedman describes holiness as "to be restored to the originally intended functioning" (raystedman.org/new-testament/Ephesians/the-foundations).

Related to holiness is being blameless. God doesn't hold sin against. We're acceptable in God's sight.

V. 5. Possess a relationship with God. It isn't an ordinary relationship like classmates, neighbors, business associates, or bonding over a hobby. It's much more intimate and personal. It's being God's children with him as the absolute loving Father. Being brought into the family of God was marked out beforehand.

The process by which we become God's children is we're adopted into his family. No one can say they were naturally and automatically born into God's family. Adoption points to the idea of choosing. We might even go so far as to say that being adopted requires an extra special love. In contrast to children who come into a family by the mother giving birth to them, the adopted child is chosen.

V. 6. Recipients of God's grace. It's described as glorious grace. None of God's grace is less than glorious, but adjective is used to emphasize the wonderful nature of God's grace. Grace is getting what we don't

deserve. Grace is described with the acrostic: God's riches at Christ's expense. Sometimes people are described as being as rich as God. Well, just how rich is God? Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos may have their billions and billions and billions and even have the capacity to lose hundreds of billions and still be uber rich. But God and his riches? We can't put a monetary amount on it because what kind of price tag do you put on the whole universe? You add up all the "money," assign a value to the stuff on the planet, then add the cost of the planet, the value of the sun and the stars and everything in the entire universe. Those are merely God's possessions. We have to get into his character. How do we assign a value to that? Out of God's super abundance of who he is and what he possesses he lavishly gives of his grace. This comes through Christ's work of salvation.

Vv. 7, 8. Redemption. In the early 1900s a man was walking in downtown Chicago. He met a boy with a bird cage full of songbirds. The man asked the boy what he was going to do with the birds. "I'm going to feed them to my cat." The man told the boy he shouldn't do that and he'd pay \$20 for the birds and the cage. "What do you want to do that for? These birds are good for nothing. They don't sing." The boy finally accepted the money and hurried off down the street. The man opened the cage door. What do you think happened? The birds burst through the opening, flew to the sky and began to sing... because they were free.

We were held in a cage of sin and were ready to be fed to the devil. Jesus paid the ransom price with his blood to rescue us. He redeemed us. We get to go free and sing.

Part of this is the forgiveness of sins. It's a courtroom setting. The judge issues the verdict. We who were guilty as sin because we were sinners had our sins set aside, expunged from our record as if they'd never happened. They are no longer held against us by the eternal Judge.

V. 9. In on the mystery. This word is often associated with the mysterious, something which needs to be unraveled. It feels like the lights should be dimmed and should have some moody organ music.

During Paul's time there were mystery religions based on the idea certain things could only be revealed to those who were properly initiated. People had to become one of the elite in the group, receive more training, submit to the spirit world, or maybe ante up enough money and then they would be let in on the secret.

The biblical idea of mystery refers to divine truths that had been previously hidden or obscured but have been revealed and could only be revealed by God. The most brilliant minds didn't have a clue of what God was going to do. God needed to turn on the light and make it possible so everybody could be in on it. God imparts his wisdom.

In Ephesians mystery relates to God bringing together Jews and non-Jews into the church of Jesus Christ. This is a preview of the totality of God's plan when at the end he will bring everything that's under heaven and earth together under Jesus Christ. Then everything will add up and make sense. There will be no longer any competitors or opposition to Christ. Everything will be in proper order under the control of Christ. All the things of earth, people and the elements of this existence, will be brought together with all the things of heaven, angels and the elements of the heavenly existence. Biblical commentator Albert Barnes: "Nothing can be more unlike than the customs, feelings, laws, and habits which prevail on earth, from those which prevail in

heaven. But the object of the plan of salvation is to restore harmony to those alienated communities, and produce eternal concord and love” (Barnes Notes on the Bible, Ephesians 1:10).

Vv. 11 - 13. Included. This is again connected to being chosen and predestined. God is working out things according to his plan which is in conformity with the purpose of his will.

Two groups are mentioned. The first is those who were the first who came to know Christ. This likely points to the Jews as Jesus himself was a Jew, called his disciples from among the Jews and his principal audience was the Jews. Paul includes himself with this group.

The second group would be the recipients of the letter, the Ephesians who were primarily a non-Jewish or Gentile body of believers. The teaching is that no group is better than the others whether they were the first to respond or they were the dominant population. The point is that people from different ethnicities and who had been enemies of each other were brought together in one organism -- the body of Christ.

The church is to be a living illustration of the power of Jesus Christ to bring people together. People from different backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, social status, ages are brought together in unity around Christ.

A second insight is being a follower of Jesus Christ isn't a solo adventure. We have others around us who are in this together with us. It's a team effort.

Vv. 13, 14. Much more to come. In New Testament times a seal from a signet ring was placed into molten wax to indicate ownership. It also was placed on an object or document to be delivered. If the seal was unbroken when the thing was delivered, it was proof of a safe and intact delivery. Certain religious cults had their followers tattooed with the cult's logo. The tattoo was the seal of belonging.

Followers of Jesus Christ receive the Holy Spirit when they place their trust in Christ as Savior. He is the seal of ownership. He is the insurance we'll be delivered intact to God. The Holy Spirit works in the life of the believer to help them understand God's Word, to guide and to comfort and more.

The Holy Spirit is also a security deposit, a down payment for what is to come. The same word was used for an engagement ring. The ring is a promise of what the young man intends. The presence of the Holy Spirit marks the inheritance God intends for those who are his.

V. 14. Out of this world inheritance

When Hetty Green died in 1916, she left behind a fortune worth in today's dollars in excess of 2.7 billion. However, she ate cold oatmeal because she didn't want to pay the cost of the gas to warm it. Her son had his leg amputated because she refused to get medical treatment because she was trying to find a free clinic. Though worth a fortune, she behaved as if she was worse off than the poorest of the poor.

There's a parallel to Christians. God has dumped a fortune into our laps. How are we living? Some live way beneath their privilege and station. We should ponder our spiritual blessings, revel in them. We should live in the light of what God has given us in the past, present and future.

How do we respond?