

God's Grand, Christ-Centered Plan



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 1:3–14; Eph. 2:6; Eph. 3:10; Col. 1:13, 14; Deut. 9:29.*

Memory Text: “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” (*Ephesians 1:3, ESV*).

Twenty-five years after becoming the first person to walk on the moon, Neil Armstrong wrote a thank-you note to the creative team who designed the spacesuit, the Extravehicular Mobility Unit (EMU), in which he took those historic steps. Calling it “the most photographed spacecraft in history” and teasing that it was successful at hiding “its ugly occupant” from view, Armstrong thanked “the EMU Gang” at the Johnson Space Center for the “tough, reliable, and almost cuddly” suit that preserved his life, sending them “a quarter century’s worth of thanks and congratulations.”

Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians with a majestic thank-you note, praising God for the blessings He has poured out, blessings as essential to the lives of believers as a spacesuit is for someone who walks on the moon. Paul argues that God has been at work on these essential blessings since “before the foundation of the world” (*Eph. 1:4*) and praises God for working through the ages on behalf of believers.

Paul’s opening here makes Ephesians especially valuable in modeling how to worship God and to praise God for the many blessings He has provided.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 8.

Chosen and Accepted in Christ

A thank-you note usually includes a description of the gift or gifts received. Paul includes a long gift list in Ephesians 1:3–14 as he thanks God for the blessings of the gospel.

Paul praises God for the fact that He has “blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing” (*Eph. 1:3, ESV*). That the blessings are spiritual (Greek, *pneumatikos*) suggests that they come through the Spirit (*pneuma*), pointing to the closing of Paul’s blessing, which celebrates the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers (*Eph. 1:13, 14*).

Ephesians 1:3–6 contains inspiring language about how God views us in Christ. Before the creation of the world, God chose us in Christ and determined that we should stand “holy and blameless” in His presence (*Eph. 1:4, ESV; compare Eph. 5:27*) as treasured sons and daughters by virtue of both Creation and Redemption in Christ (*Eph. 1:5*). Since before the sun began to shine, it has been His strategy that we would be “accepted in the Beloved” (*Eph. 1:6, NKJV*). In short, it’s God’s intention for us to be saved. We lose salvation only by our own sinful choices.

What does the phrase “in the heavenly places” mean in Ephesians (the only place it is used in the New Testament)? Study the uses of the phrase. (See *Eph. 1:3, 20; Eph. 2:6; Eph. 3:10; Eph. 6:12; compare the use of “in the heavens,” Eph. 3:15, Eph. 4:10, Eph. 6:9*.)

In Ephesians the phrases “in the heavenly places” and “in the heavens” or “in heaven” point to heaven as the dwelling place of God (*Eph. 1:3, Eph. 6:9*), to the location of spiritual powers (*Eph. 1:10, 20, 21; Eph. 3:10, 15; Eph. 6:12*), and to the location of Christ’s exaltation at the right hand of the Father (*Eph. 1:20*). Believers have access to these “heavenly places” in the present as the sphere where spiritual blessings are offered through Christ (*Eph. 1:3, Eph. 2:6*). Though “the heavenly places” have become a place of blessing for believers, they are still the location of conflict from evil powers that contest the lordship of Christ (*Eph. 3:10, Eph. 6:12*).

Dwell on Ephesians 1:4, which says that we have been chosen in Him, Christ, “before the foundation of the world.” What does that mean? How does it reveal to us God’s love for us and His desire for us to be saved?

Costly Redemption; Lavish Forgiveness

Sin had been a dark, dominating force in the lives of the members of Paul's audience. Paul can describe them in their prior existence as the walking dead—"dead in trespasses and sins" (*Eph. 2:1, NKJV*) yet "walking" or living as Satan commanded them (*Eph. 2:1-3*). Enslaved to sin and Satan, they had no ability to free themselves. They needed rescue. God has done so through His gracious actions in Christ, and Paul celebrates two new blessings of God's grace in the lives of believers: redemption and forgiveness.

Read Ephesians 1:7, 8. "Redemption" is an idea that is used frequently in the New Testament. Compare the uses of the idea in Colossians 1:13, 14; Titus 2:13, 14; and Hebrews 9:15. What themes do these passages share in common with Ephesians 1:7, 8?

The Greek word translated "redemption" in Ephesians 1:7 is *apolutrōsis*, originally used for buying a slave's freedom or paying to free a captive. One can hear echoed the voice of the slave trader auctioning his merchandise and the cold grinding of a slave's manacles. When the New Testament discusses redemption, it highlights the costliness of setting the slaves free.

Our freedom comes at an extreme cost: "In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood" (*Eph. 1:7, ESV*). The idea of redemption also celebrates God's gracious generosity in paying the high price of our liberty. God gives us our freedom and dignity. We are no longer enslaved!

"To be redeemed is to be treated as a person, not an object. It is to become a citizen of heaven, rather than a slave of the earth."—Alister E. McGrath, *What Was God Doing on the Cross?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p. 78.

Note carefully that the idea that God pays the price of redemption to Satan is a medieval, not a biblical, one. God neither owes nor pays Satan anything.

The benefits of Calvary also include "the forgiveness of our trespasses" (*Eph. 1:7, ESV*). On the cross, Christ takes upon Himself the price of our sin, both past and future, "canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands" (*Col. 2:14, ESV*). In doing this work of redemption and forgiveness through Christ, God is acting as our generous Father, with the "riches of his grace" being "lavished upon us" (*Eph. 1:7, 8, ESV*).

What does it mean to you that through Christ's atoning sacrifice you are forgiven and redeemed? What if you feel that you are unworthy of it? (Hint: you are unworthy; that's the whole point of the Cross.)

God's Grand, Christ-Centered Plan

What is God's "plan for the fullness of time," and how extensive is its reach? *Eph. 1:9, 10.*

Paul uses three labels for God's plan. It is (1) "the mystery of his will," (2) "his purpose," and (3) "a plan for the fullness of time" (*ESV*). What is God's ultimate, final plan? To unite everything, everywhere, in Jesus.

The term that Paul uses to describe the plan is a picturesque one (Greek, *anakephalaiōsasthai*), to "head up" or to "sum up" all things in Christ. In ancient accounting practice, you would "add up" a column of figures and place the total at the top. Jesus heads God's final, eschatological plan. This Christ-centered plan was crafted "before the foundation of the world" (*Eph. 1:4*) and is so broad that it encompasses all time ("the fullness of the times," *NKJV*) and space ("all things . . . things in heaven and things on earth," *ESV*). Paul announces unity in Christ as the grand, divine goal for the universe.

In discussing God's "plan for the fullness of time" (*Eph. 1:10, ESV*), Paul shares the theme that he will weave through the letter. God begins His plan to unify all things, rooted in the death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus (*Eph. 1:15–2:10*), by founding the church and unifying disparate elements of humankind, Jews and Gentiles, in it (*Eph. 2:11–3:13*).

In this way, the church signals to the evil powers that God's plan is underway and their divisive rule will end (*Eph. 3:10*). As the Bible says elsewhere: "For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (*Rev. 12:12, NKJV*).

The last half of Paul's letter opens with a passionate call to unity (*Eph. 4:1–16*) and continues with a lengthy exhortation to avoid behavior that damages unity and, instead, to build solidarity with fellow believers (*Eph. 4:17–6:9*). Paul concludes with the rousing image of the church as a unified army, participating with vigor in waging peace in Christ's name (*Eph. 6:10–20*).

How can you acknowledge and celebrate that the redemption you have experienced in Christ Jesus is part of something sweeping and grand, an integral part of God's studied and ultimate plan to unite all things in Christ?

Living in Praise of His Glory

“In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory” (*Eph. 1:11, 12, NKJV*).

The believers in Ephesus seem to have lost a clear sense of who they are as Christians, to have “lost heart” (*see Eph. 3:13*). In line with what he has affirmed earlier (*Eph. 1:3–5*), Paul wishes again to shore up their identity as Christians. Believers are not victims of haphazard, arbitrary decisions by various deities or astral powers. They are the children of God (*Eph. 1:5*) and have access to many blessings through Christ based on the deep counsels and eternal decisions of God. It is God’s purpose, counsel, and will (*Eph. 1:11*) that is being worked out in their lives in line with the still wider plan of God to unite all things in Christ (*Eph. 1:10*). They may have unshakable confidence in their standing before God and in the effectiveness of the blessings He provides. Their lives should shout the message of Ephesians 1:3–14: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Compare the uses of the idea of “inheritance” in Ephesians 1:11, 14, 18. Why do you think this idea is important to Paul?

Have you ever received an inheritance as the result of someone’s death? Perhaps a relative left you a valuable treasure or a considerable sum of money. In Paul’s view by virtue of the death of Jesus, Christians have received an inheritance from God (*Eph. 1:14*) and become an “inheritance” to God (*Eph. 1:18*).

In the Old Testament, God’s people are sometimes thought of as being His “heritage,” or inheritance (*Deut. 9:29, Deut. 32:9, Zech. 2:12*). This sense of being or becoming God’s inheritance is clear in Ephesians 1:18 and is the likely meaning of the term in Ephesians 1:11, as well (which would then be translated, “In him we have become an inheritance”). As a central element in their Christian identity, Paul wishes believers to know their value to God. They not only possess an inheritance from God (*Eph. 1:14, Eph. 3:6; compare Eph. 5:5*), but they are God’s inheritance.

What is the difference between working to get something and inheriting it instead? How does this idea help us understand what we have been given in Jesus?

The Holy Spirit: Seal and Down Payment

In Ephesians 1:13, 14, Paul tells in brief the conversion story of his readers. What are the steps in that story?

In exploring the importance of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, Paul uses two images, or metaphors, for the Spirit. He first pictures the Holy Spirit as a “seal,” identifying a sealing presence of the Spirit that occurs from the time of conversion. In ancient times, seals were used for a wide variety of functions: to authenticate copies of laws and agreements, to validate the excellence or quantity of a container’s contents (e.g., *Ezek. 28:12*), or to witness transactions (e.g., *Jer. 32:10–14, 44*), contracts, letters (e.g., *1 Kings 21:8*), wills, and adoptions. Imprinted on an object, a seal announced both ownership and protection. The presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives marks believers as belonging to God and conveys God’s promise to protect them (*compare Eph. 4:30*). They have been “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (*Eph. 1:13, ESV*).

“Paul plainly states that at the moment one gives his/her life to Jesus and believes in Him the Holy Spirit seals (Greek verb: *sphragizō*) that believer in Christ for the day of redemption. Wonderful liberating and reassuring truth! The Spirit of God marks Christ’s followers with the seal of salvation right when they first believe.”—Jiří Moskala, “Misinterpreted End-Time Issues: Five Myths in Adventism,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2017), p. 95.

The second image Paul uses for the Holy Spirit is that of “guarantee.” The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance, which looks toward the moment when the inheritance is to be given in full (*compare 2 Cor. 1:22, 2 Cor. 5:5*).

The word translated “guarantee” (*arrabōn*) was a Hebrew loan word that was used widely in the common or Koine Greek of New Testament times to indicate a “first installment,” “deposit,” or “down payment” that requires the payer to make additional payments.

Note that believers do not pay this down payment but receive it from God. The treasured presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, says Paul, is a first installment of the full inheritance of salvation and redemption that will come with the return of Christ. Our job is to receive with a grateful and submissive heart what we have been offered in Jesus.

Further Thought: Does Ephesians 1:3–14 teach that God predetermines the futures of human beings, predestining some to everlasting life and others to everlasting death? Many people, unfortunately, believe this. Consider, however, these ideas:

1. In the passage, the role of Christ is determinative, since the divine choice to adopt us occurs “through Jesus Christ” (*Eph. 1:5, ESV*) or “in him” (*Eph. 1:4, 11*). This suggests that God’s election and predetermination are exercised toward all who choose faith in Christ rather than selecting who will be saved or lost on a case-by-case basis even before people are born. God’s decision is the studied, predetermined, divine response to those who exercise faith in Christ.
2. Ephesians 1:3–14 also contains vivid relational language about God’s work of salvation. God is “Father,” and we are His “adopted” children (*Eph. 1:3–5*), who receive His blessings in bountiful measure (*Eph. 1:8*). We must understand the language about God’s choice and predetermination in the light of this rich, relational language. God is not a distant, unfeeling judge who makes decrees from afar but the caring Father of all His children (*see Eph. 3:15*).
3. That God honors human choice is reflected in Ephesians 1:3–14 (especially Ephesians 1:13, where “hearing” and “believing” are judged to be important), elsewhere in the letter (*Eph. 2:8, Eph. 3:17, Eph. 4:1–6:20*, all of which emphasize or presume the exercise of choice and the response of faith), and in other passages in the New Testament (*e.g., 1 Tim. 2:4, Acts 17:22–31*). Or, as Ellen G. White expressed it: “In the matchless gift of His Son, God has encircled the whole world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air which circulates around the globe. All who choose to breathe this life-giving atmosphere will live and grow up to the stature of men and women in Christ Jesus.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 68.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What arguments would you add to those given above supporting the idea that God does not pick and choose before we have been created who will be saved and who will be lost?
- 2 Whose choice ultimately decides whether or not a person has salvation in Jesus?
- 3 “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (*Eph. 1:7, NKJV*). How does this verse reveal the reality of salvation by faith alone and not by the works of the law?

Remarkable Path to Lebanon

By KATHIE LICHTENWALTER

Volunteer teacher Ruan Oliveira struggled to listen to the speaker at a “I Will Go!” mission-training event at Middle East University in Beirut, Lebanon. “Where have I seen that guy before?” he wondered.

Ruan had arrived from Brazil to serve as a volunteer teacher at the Adventist Learning Center, which teaches Syrian refugee children in grades 1–8. He was listening to university teacher Brian Manley describe the work of “tentmakers,” Seventh-day Adventists who follow apostle Paul’s example of using their profession to work in non-Christian countries.

Ruan pulled out his cellphone and began to scroll through years of photos.

Mission was in Ruan’s blood. Born in Brazil, he had grown up in a family that talked and lived mission. As a high school student, he accompanied his parents to Argentina for an “I Will Go!” mission conference in 2017. His heart was deeply touched as he heard about the needs of the Middle East.

During his first year of university studies, he accepted an invitation to teach English in a non-Christian country in Asia. Soon after he arrived, however, the language school closed. He stayed to study the local language, but he was forbidden from mentioning God to anyone. Returning to Brazil for his second year of university, Ruan felt a strong desire to go abroad again. He filled out several applications for openings in the Middle East, the region that had captured his imagination at the 2017 conference in Argentina.

“God, it’s up to You,” he prayed as he sent off the applications on VividFaith.com, the Adventist Church’s official website for volunteers. “I will accept the first response that I get.”

Seven minutes later, a message popped up on his phone. It was from the Adventist Learning Center in Beirut. Ruan arrived at the school six weeks later. After Asia, he had an appreciation for the religious freedom in Lebanon. “I can even tell them I am a Christian!” he said.

After a year in Lebanon, Ruan intends to finish his studies and become a full-time missionary. His conviction that God has called him was reaffirmed when he remembered where he had seen Brian Manley previously.



After Manley finished speaking at the conference, Ruan approached him, phone in hand.

“I know where I’ve seen you before!” he said, scrolling back five years to show a photo of him and his parents with Manley at the conference in Argentina in 2017. It was Manley’s presentation about tentmakers at the conference that had stirred Ruan’s heart to serve God in the Middle East.