

## BLESSED

A few years ago, the Chicago Tribune ran a story entitled "The Mystery of the Missing Owner". The article was actually a legal notice published by the Illinois State Treasurer's Office seeking to give money away to rightful owners -- the contents of abandoned safe deposit boxes, forgotten bank accounts, security deposit checks, uncashed paychecks, and dividend checks. More than a billion dollars is owed to nearly five million people that the Treasurer's Office could not trace. The available supplement listed the names and last known addresses of 10 individuals or couples each owed over \$100,000. What followed were 116 pages packed tightly with names from Lucilee Aakeberg to Leonard E. Zyzda. The names of 113,000 people all owed more than \$100 in cash and/or stock!

It seems like such a shame that people could be unaware of their rightful treasures. Yet that is precisely the condition of many Christians who live without taking advantage of God's promises of peace, strength, comfort, wisdom, love and many other spiritual treasures to which all the children of God are entitled. What treasures might God be holding in trust for you to claim?

We are starting a new series today called Blessed. Last fall I was praying about what I should speak about this year. I asked God what He thought the people of Gregory Drive needed to hear. I felt like God was just saying to me "just tell them that they are blessed." So that is what we are going to do. For the next few weeks, we are going to be remembering the many ways that God has blessed us.

A few years ago, there was a song that came out called The Blessing. It is a song based on the priestly prayer God gave to His people in Num 6;

Num 6:24-26 The LORD bless you and keep you; 25 the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; 26 the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.

During COVID, that song was taken and sung over many different nations and cities all around the world. It seemed to spread even faster than the virus itself. At the heart of this song and at the heart of this movement is a simple belief, that God wants to bless his people. As believers in Jesus Christ, we are truly blessed. So, let me ask you a simple question this morning, do you feel blessed right now? Do we really remember and understand all the ways that God has blessed us? Let's read this passage from the book of Ephesians together;

Ephesians 1:3 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. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will -- 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 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 with all wisdom and understanding. 9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment -- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. 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, 12 in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you 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.

This scripture says 3 things about God's blessing;

1. Selected (vs. 3-6) - past

God has truly blessed us. His blessings to us started long before we were even born. Long before even the creation of the world. He chose to bless us from before the beginning of time. I like the way the Message version translates these verses;

Eph 1:3-5 (Message) How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. 4 Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. 5 Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!)

God has blessed you. Long before you were even born, God loved you and chose to have a relationship with you. Even before the world was created, God had a plan for your life.

What does it mean that God chose us? You cannot discuss this verse without addressing what it means that God 'predestined' us. What is predestination? You do not have to study theology long before you find the contradiction between predestination (which means that God chooses who will be saved) with free will (that we choose whether to be saved or not). The bible teaches both.

When I was in seminary, I remember taking a class in Theology in my first year. The professor got up and for the entire class taught what the bible had to say about predestination. By the end of that class, I remember thinking to myself "wow, he really believes in predestination!" I guess we all know where he is leaning in terms of predestination vs free will. The next day he spent the entire class teaching what the bible says about free will. At the end of the class one student got up and said "I do not understand, which is it?" I will always remember his words. He said "It's both!"

In other words, both are true and both are essential. It is like two poles with a wire hanging between them upon which all theology hangs. Cut either one down and everything else slides off. It is like a railway track, running together always the same distance away. It is like a door that says 'knock and the door will be open'. As you are passing through you see written on the opposite side are the words 'chosen before the foundation of the world'. There is a tension between the two that must exist.

I heard about a small town had three churches: Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist. All three had a serious problem with squirrels in the church. Each church in its own fashion had a meeting to deal with the problem. The Presbyterians decided that it was predestined that squirrels be in the church and that they would just have to live with them. The Methodists decided that they had free will, so they chose to deal with the squirrels lovingly in the style of Charles Wesley. They humanely trapped them and released them in a park at the edge of town. Within 3 days, they were all back in the church. The Baptists had the best solution. They voted the squirrels in as members. Now the squirrels only show up at Christmas and Easter.

When a Calvinist says that all things happen according to the predestination and sovereignty of God, he speaks the truth. When an Arminian says that when a man sins, the sin is his own, and that if he continues in sin, and perishes, his eternal damnation will lie entirely at his own door, I believe that he also speaks the truth. The fact is, there is truth in both these systems of theology. -- Charles Spurgeon

The reality is that God chooses and we choose, and somehow in the power and sovereignty of God those two things always line up. God has a plan for life. It is the best plan. God knows you and created you for a purpose. He has given you everything you need to do what He has called you to do. However, it is up to us to do it. We are SELECTED. God blessed us from the beginning.

## 2. Saved (vs. 7-10) - present

God has not only called us and blessed us in the past, he is blessing us in the present. Look at the words that are used here. God has redeemed us, forgiven us, poured out His grace upon us.

Eph 1:7 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 with all wisdom and understanding. 9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment

Jesus has redeemed us. There are a number of Greek words that are used to communicate the idea of redemption. The first is AGORAZO. This means to purchase. The Agora was like the shopping mall of the ancient world. You would go to the Agora to buy things, including slaves. The word AGORAZO is the picture of buying a slave at the market.

The second word for redemption is connected to it. It is the word EXAGORAZO. It is the combination of the word AGORAZO and the word Ex which means out from. Together it means to purchase out. It is not only buying a slave, but then taking them out of the market. Removing them not only from the position of slavery but also from the place of slavery.

The third word, the word that is used here, is the Greek word APOLUTROS. It means to set free. It takes the picture one step further, not simply the purchase of the slave and taking them out of the market, but then giving them the freedom and tools to go. We are not just freed from our past but blessed in our present.

Jesus has poured out His grace upon us. I love that word LAVISHED. It is the Greek word PERISSEUO which means super abound, exceedingly abundant – even excessive. God has not simply given us a taste of his goodness, a tiny trickle or grace. He has poured it out upon us like an ocean.

The world is full of abundance and opportunity, but far too many people come to the fountain of life with a cup instead of a tank car ... a teaspoon instead of a steam shovel. They expect little and as a result they get little. – Ben Sweetland

Back in 1990 many soldiers had been deployed for the Gulf War. That Christmas, a town in Georgia decided that it wanted to bless the families of the troops that were serving overseas. Arrangements were made at a local toy store that the children could go in and choose anything they wanted for Christmas. Reporters from the local TV station were there covering the event. One 11-year-old girl walked in and was told like the others to choose whatever she wanted. She walked up to a bin near the front doors with little stuffed animals on sale for a dollar and pulled one out. Slowly turning it over and over in her hands, she shyly asked, "How much does this cost?" The manager replied, "It's all paid for honey. Pick out anything you want." The little girl asked again, "But how much does it cost?" Again, the manager replied, "It's all paid for. Pick out anything you want. Anything in the whole store." A whole store filled with anything her heart desired for free, and all she could focus on was what was the cheapest.

We are like that with God sometimes. God pours out His grace upon us in such vast measure, yet we fail to grasp it. We reject the offer. We are SELECTED and SAVED ...

### 3. Sealed (vs. 13-14) - future

God has not only blessed us in the past and present, we have a blessed future waiting for us as well. We have an inheritance waiting for us.

The verse that we read this morning ends saying "Having 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." Through the Holy Spirit (and the evidence of a changed life) we know that are the children of God. We have assurance that there is an inheritance waiting for us in heaven.

On December 31, 2012 the body of 60-year-old Timothy Gray was found under a Wyoming overpass. He was a homeless cowboy who had died of hypothermia and exposure. Timothy Gray had made some bad decisions in his life. He had a string of bad luck. There was also one important detail about his life that you need to know, he was about to inherit millions of dollars.

Timothy Gray's great-grandfather was William Clark. He made a fortune in the Montana Gold rush and went on to become a very wealthy and successful businessman and politician. He started a town as a maintenance stop on one of his railway lines in Nevada. A little town you may have heard of – Las Vegas. Clark County, Nevada (where Las Vegas is located) was named after him. At one time he was one of the 10 wealthiest men in America. When he died his fortune was passed down to his daughter Huguette Clark. She had died the year before in 2011 at the age of 104. Her will gave the details of who would inherit her \$300 million fortune, but it was tied up in the courts for months. Just a few weeks after Timothy Gray died, the money was released. He inherited 19 million dollars.

So how does an heir to a fortune end up dying like a pauper? Timothy Gray knew his family history. He knew how much money his aunt had and that he was going to inherit a huge amount of it. He just chose to do nothing about it. He chose to ignore it. If that had been me, I would have been camped out at the court house. I would be reading all the documents. I would be out at the mall pricing new suits and putting in an order for a new car. Maybe getting a realtor to price out home in the area. I would be making plans. One thing I would NOT be doing. Living like a homeless person under a bridge.

Church, we have a great inheritance that is before us. Some day in the not-so-distant future God is going to call us home. That day will be the culmination of something that happened in eternity past, when God made the decision to create you and choose you to be with Him for all time. Oh, what a glorious day that will be.

Until then, we need to remember that God has blessed us. Past, present and future, God has blessed us. Maybe it is time we start living like it. In light of God's great blessing, how can we continue to live our lives the same way?

While on a short-term mission's trip, Pastor Jack Hinton was leading worship at a leper colony on the island of Tobago. A woman who had been facing away from the pulpit turned around. "It was the most hideous face I had ever seen," Hinton said. "The woman's nose and ears were entirely gone. She lifted a fingerless hand in the air and asked, 'Can we sing Count Your Many Blessings?'"

Overcome with emotion, Hinton left the service. He was followed by a team member who said, "I guess you'll never be able to sing that song again." "Yes, I will," he replied, "but I know that I will never sing it the same way again."