

## Paul's Great Thanksgiving

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Reading Ephesians 1:3-14, especially 8—*"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ."*

There is no better way to know how Paul felt about the gospel of the grace of God than to read "the great thanksgiving" with which he opens the epistle to the Ephesians. Of course, this is not the only epistle that begins with a thanksgiving to God. That is Paul's customary method of beginning his letters.

This epistle is likely unique because the apostle begins by highlighting the immense richness of the gospel. This is an important point. Usually, the Apostle's expressions of gratitude focus on the specific circumstances and accomplishments of his audience. However, in this case, it is not addressed to an individual friend or colleague, nor to a particular church with its unique background. Instead, there is no specific subject of thankfulness tied to the person or church being addressed.

He was compelled to return to what Christians commonly acknowledge as thanking God on behalf of his readers. Essentially, this means he was focusing on the core message of the Gospel. Paul's enthusiasm is always heightened when he confronts the fundamental truths of the Gospel.

Paul's expression of gratitude to God centres on salvation in Christ, celebrated with magnificent style, deep feeling, and broad perspective. This salvation involves the entire triune God. There is the loving activity

- of God the Father (vss. 3-6),
- of God the Son (vss. 7-12),
- of God the Holy Spirit (in verses 13-14).

The doctrine of the Trinity underpins the entire explanation of salvation in the New Testament, and its components frequently appear in descriptions of the saving process. Consequently, it is natural that a trinitarian element should be evident in this

portrayal of salvation through Christ.

Paul seems to describe salvation as unfolding step by step over time, rather than first analysing it according to its theological components. He traces its preparation, execution, publication and application:

- Its preparation (vss. 4-5),
- Its execution (vss. 6-7),
- Its publication (vss. 8-10)
- Its application (vss. 11-16),

Furthermore, it shows this in relation both to Jews (vss. 11-12) and to Gentiles (vss. 13-14).

He shows us the whole history of salvation in Christ, from eternity to eternity—from the eternal purpose in the loving heart of the Father, to the eternal consummation when all things in heaven and earth shall be summed up in Christ as under one head.

Viewed this way, the passage clearly reveals its core as a condensed history of the kingdom of God on earth—an apostolic summary of human history seen through the lens of Divine activity in establishing, developing, and completing the kingdom.

Now, let's observe how contemplating the unfolding of this significant historical process influences the Apostle's mind and heart. This is not a formal expression of the Apostle's gratitude to God, but rather a literal, inextinguishable burst of praise.

The opening word, "Blessed!", sets the tone for the keynote. Notice the repeated phrase, "Blessed be God who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing!" This reveals Paul's focus and feelings as he wrote. When a person's speech is limited to this single word—"Blessing, blessing, blessing!"—it clearly indicates what is in his heart.

We should note the ingenious—and truly heartfelt—connection of the term "Blessed" when used for both God and for man. Paul blesses God because God has so richly blessed man. Only God blesses with deeds, while man can bless Him only with words. However, what stands out most is the joyful gratitude, delighted wonder, and swelling praise that fill the Apostle's heart as he reflects on what man has gained through Christ's salvation. He

considers it as embodying every imaginable good.

Blessed be God! he cries. Why? Because He has blessed us! How? With every possible blessing! Every conceivable blessing, Paul says, is poured out on us in the salvation offered in Christ. And the language he uses shows us that he means this to the uttermost.

As the Apostle continues to describe the blessings of salvation in Christ, it almost seems as if his heart is overflowing. It's not just penmanship for the heart. It's not just a matter of words, but of genuine feeling.

The Apostle piles up phrases at this point, and it is difficult to follow him. He is not content to say that in the salvation in Christ, God has blessed us with "every kind of blessing." He adds two further characterisations. "Blessed be God," he cries, "who hath blessed us ...

- in every kind of spiritual blessing ...
- in the heavenlies ...
- in Christ."

How should we interpret this sequence of threefold developments? No wonder the commentators are divided on how the successive clauses relate to one another.

How are we to interpret these clauses?

First, either as a single continuous string, each qualifies the one before it. Is this what Paul praises God for?

*"He has blessed us in the salvation in Christ ... with every kind of Spirit-given blessing ... that is in the heavenly places in Christ."*

Interpreting the clauses this way suggests that Paul is emphasising how the blessings of heaven are bestowed upon us by the Spirit. All the blessings stored in Christ—who is the exalted Conqueror of sin and death, now seated in heaven and clothed with all authority in heaven and earth on behalf of His people, His body, His church—are generously given to us through His Spirit, who is sent to serve the heirs of salvation.

Or, second, should we interpret these clauses as parallel

statements, not just forming a string of truth, but elaborating on the nature of the blessing mentioned?

*"He has blessed us with every kind of blessing that comes from the Spirit of God—specifically heavenly and supernatural gifts, which are much greater and more desirable than any earthly possessions.*

*These blessings are embodied in Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all treasures of knowledge, wisdom, and blessing.*

*He is so much greater than His gifts that in Him are contained all blessings, and more than we can understand by any specific kind of blessing."*

Paul appears to have been referring to either one of these things. Determining which is challenging, and commentators are likely to continue to disagree on this issue.

It doesn't seem to matter much which approach we take to analyse this profound statement from a sincere heart. Either way, Paul has expressed all that can be said about the incredible blessing of salvation in Christ – the greatest blessing mankind can imagine. As he declares, "What eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, and what hath entered not into the heart of man, what God hath prepared for them that love him?"

As he allows what God has prepared for those who love Him to reveal itself before his amazed eyes, Paul is filled with gratitude for the blessing it brings to men burdened by sin. It is no wonder that we are moved by his vivid description of what he saw! What God has prepared for those who love Him! This is the central theme of the passage. Everything is of God – not earned or achieved by us. It is solely God's work. Because of this, Paul praises God passionately for it all. If it had been of human effort, his praise would be restrained. That is why he freely expresses his gratefulness, affirming that all blessings in Christ come from God's gracious purpose, and offering praise solely to Him for His gift.

The central theme in all of Paul's praise is 'soli Deo gloria.' Everything related to salvation that reaches mankind derives

solely from God's grace—a grace that God prepared in eternity past, which is now poured out on us through the sovereign work of the Spirit, and will remain upon us forever, in accordance with His gracious plan. All of this aims to bring praise to the glory of His grace.

The Apostle explains that when he learned of his readers' faith in Christ, he responded with thanksgiving to God because faith in Christ originates from God, and those who believe are upheld by His extraordinary grace. Essentially, this echoes the idea that "if God is for us, no one can be against us," and it is this conviction that deeply moves the Apostle to praise.

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