

LESSON ONE

Get in Line with God's Plan

FOCAL TEXT

Ephesians 1:1–14

BACKGROUND

Ephesians 1

MAIN IDEA

God calls us to participate in the lavish plan he has set forth in Christ for enjoying all the blessings of being in good standing in God's family.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

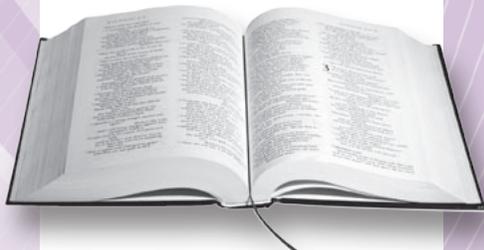
What has God done for us in Christ, and why does it matter?

STUDY AIM

To describe God's plan for human life and respond to God's offer

QUICK READ

The Holy Spirit will enable we who are in Christ to claim the generous provisions God makes available to us.



I remember hearing a few years back about a famous golfer who flew to a Middle Eastern country to play golf with the king of that particular country and some of his special friends. The king sent his private jet to bring the famous golfer to his palace, and he entertained his guest royally while he was there.

As the golfer boarded the plane to come home, the king told him he wanted to give him a gift for his kindness in coming to play with him and his friends. The golfer protested, but the king insisted. “What would you like as a gift?” the king persistently asked. Finally the golfer relented and told the king that he could always use another golf club. With that he boarded the plane and headed home.

Weeks passed, and no gift came from the king. All the while the golfer fantasized about what kind of club the king would send. Perhaps he would send a jewel-studded putter or a driver crafted just for him. Finally, the golfer received in the mail an envelope from the king. Confused about how that envelope could hold his long-awaited golf club, the golfer ripped open the envelope and discovered a deed to a beautiful country club nearby that sported the most spectacular golf course of the region. The golfer expected a golf *club* but the king gave him a *Golf Club*.

I don’t know whether the story is true, but it nevertheless serves as a parable of our lives. Most of us live beneath our privileges as Christians. To use the language of the story, we settle for an individual golf *club* when God really wants us to have a *Golf Club*. No passage in the New Testament so clearly identifies what God wants to give each of us as Christians as the opening verses of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians.

EPHESIANS 1:1–14

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

²Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord
Jesus Christ.

³Praise 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. ⁴For he chose us in him before the creation of the world
to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵he predestined us
to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance

with his pleasure and will—⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. ⁹And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to 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.

¹¹In 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, ¹²in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³And 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, ¹⁴who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

The Promise (1:1–3)

After the introduction of his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul presented a remarkable picture of God as a father “who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3). How distorted at times is our picture of God. We often think of God as a tyrant who capriciously moves us around like checkers on a board. Or we picture God as a judge with a long stick ready to rap us on the shoulder any time we get out of line. Or we understand God to be an impersonal force to whom we cannot relate in a personal way. Or we consider God a distant proprietor who is not really concerned.

These commonly held concepts of God are not the biblical picture of God. Paul picked up on the picture of God given by Jesus himself, who called God our Father. God is not a tyrant, a judge, an impersonal force, or a distant supervisor. He is our Father who wants to bless us.

How can we experience God's blessing? The blessing God provides can be ours "in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). To experience the blessing of God in our lives, we must be in a relationship with Christ, and we must also be in fellowship with Christ. God wants to enrich our lives with his blessings. That's the kind of God he is. But God cannot do this when we are apart from Christ or out of fellowship with Christ, for Christ is the one through whom God's blessings are supplied. How do we know that God is this kind of God? We know because of what God has provided for us through Jesus Christ in the process of salvation.

The Provision (1:4–12)

Paul did not leave us to guess about what God wants to provide us. Instead, Paul described God's provision in elaborate detail.

The Apostle announced that God "chose us in him before the creation of the world" (1:4). Salvation is not something we do for God. Salvation is a gift from God. God takes the initiative in the process of salvation. He "chose us." Jesus presented a similar idea in John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." We do not provide our own salvation; God does.

GOD'S ELECTION

Much debate ensues among Christians about the idea of God's election. Paul raised this issue with his claim that God "chose us in him before the creation of the world" (Eph. 1:4).

How are we to understand this difficult idea? If we focus on the phrase "before the creation of the world" we might be tempted to take the position that God's election of us is strictly arbitrary, that we have no choice in the matter. That is, God has already decided that some of us are in and some of us are out.

On the other hand, if we focus on the phrase "in him" we will reach a different conclusion. The New Testament makes it clear that we have a choice about whether we will be *in Christ*.

Perhaps we can understand this somewhat complicated concept like this. God decided before the creation of the world that all those who choose to be "in Christ" will be a part of God's elect.

In addition, God “predestined us to be adopted as his sons” (Eph. 1:5). The idea of adoption is one of the most beautiful New Testament pictures of what God has done for us. When a person was adopted in the ancient world, he had all the rights of a legitimate son in his own family, and he completely lost all rights in his old family. In the eyes of the law, an adopted son was a new person. In fact, so new was he that even all debts and obligations connected with his previous family were canceled out as if they had never existed. That pictures what God has done for us. He adopted us into his forever family, giving us all the rights in his family. He then canceled out all our past and made us new persons.

Paul added that God also redeemed us. He wrote: “In him we have redemption through his blood” (1:7). “Redemption” comes from a word that means *to ransom*, a word from the slave market. A slave on sale was powerless to liberate himself, because he was under an obligation he himself could never pay. However, when someone paid a ransom for him, the slave was released to go with his new owner. That is what God did for us. He bought us on the slave market of sin, and he set us free.

Further, in Christ, God also forgave us: “In him we have . . . the forgiveness of sins” (1:7). “Forgiveness” can be translated *dismissed*. That is, God has dismissed our sins. They have been set aside and are no longer taken into account. The word translated “forgiveness” can also be translated *to carry away*. This is a reference to the scapegoat used on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). Every year, the high priest would take a goat, transfer to that goat all the sins of the people, and send the goat out into the wilderness, symbolizing the carrying away of their sins. God forgave us and redeemed us.

Finally, Paul declared that God “made known to us the mystery of his will” (Eph.1:9). “Mystery” does not mean something mysterious or weird. It means a *sacred secret*, once hidden but now revealed to God’s people. The mystery about which Paul spoke was the mystery of God’s plan for humankind. God has a plan for our world. This plan is something no course of instruction, no university curriculum, and no scientific investigation will ever discover. God had to reveal this plan to us.

Here is God’s plan: Jesus came into the world to wipe out the divisions, to remove the tensions, and to close the gaps that separate us from God and from others. God wants to bring all people and all things together

as one. Through salvation we not only learn about this plan, but we also have a part in the implementation of the plan.

Through the process of salvation, God has chosen us, adopted us, redeemed us, forgiven us, and then revealed to us his will. We know that God is a God who wants to bless us because of what God has done for us in Christ through the process of salvation.

But how do we know all these things have occurred? How do we know that we have been chosen, adopted, redeemed, and forgiven? How do we know that God has revealed his will to us? How do we know that salvation is for real? We know these things because they have been confirmed by the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The Prompter (1:13–14)

What does the Holy Spirit do in our lives? Paul referred to the two-fold work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

In the *present*, the Holy Spirit seals us. A “seal” served four purposes in the ancient world. First, a seal was used to guarantee the genuine character of a document, as a notary public today uses his or her seal to guarantee the genuineness of a signature. That is what the Holy Spirit does. As the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and lives in us, he gives evidence we are genuine Christians.

Second, a seal was used to mark ownership as we do when we put the names on our children’s clothes as they go off to camp. That is what the Holy Spirit does. As the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and lives in us, he marks us as belonging to Christ.

Third, a seal was used to protect against tampering or harm as we do today by putting locks on boxes. That is what the Holy Spirit does. As the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and lives in us, he keeps us from being tampered with by Satan. He protects us.

Fourth, a seal was used to indicate the transaction was completed as we do today when we put our signature on a document. That is what the Holy Spirit does. As the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and lives in us, he reminds us that our redemption is complete. The deal has been cut. We now belong to God.

Right now, in the life of every believer, the Holy Spirit is giving assurance that all these things are true. As Paul put it in his Roman epistle,

“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:16).

In the *future*, the Holy Spirit will complete the work of God in our lives. The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives points to the future God has for us, for the Holy Spirit is “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance” (1:14). The Greek word for “deposit” means the *earnest money* on the purchase of something. It means the *down payment* or *first installment*. The Holy Spirit is the earnest money or down payment that guarantees the full payment of our inheritance in the future.

This inheritance may be a reference to our resurrection body that will be provided for us at death, a resurrection body that is adequate for our new existence in the life to come. Or this inheritance may be a reference to the place prepared for us in heaven, a place Jesus said he would prepare specifically for us (John 14:1–3). Or this inheritance may be a symbol of the eternal fellowship we will have with God and with the children of God through all eternity.

The Holy Spirit provides the assurance *now* that we will eventually receive our inheritance *in the future*. Because of what the Holy Spirit does for us now and because of what the Holy Spirit confirms about our future, the Holy Spirit prompts us to claim the provision our heavenly Father wants to give to each of us as his children. What a tragedy if we settle for a golf *club* when God wants to give us a *Golf Club*.

NOT LIVING BENEATH OUR PRIVILEGES

What can we do to make sure we do not live beneath our privileges?

- We need to remember who we are. We are God’s children, heirs to all the riches of God (see Romans 8:16).
- We need to remember whose we are. We belong to the God who is able to do more than we can even ask or even think (see Eph. 3:20).
- We need to remember what God has provided for us. Paul’s list in our text only scratches the surface of the things God has provided for those who love him (see 1 Corinthians 2:9).

Implications and Actions

Our text reminds us, first of all, that the source of our riches is God. Because God is our heavenly Father, we are heirs to everything God has. So often we confront the challenges of life with an eye on our own resources and understandably are overwhelmed. If we will remember that God's resources are available to us as we confront life's challenges, this will transform our perspective and inspire a new confidence in us as we live our Christian lives.

But we must also remember the scope of our riches. God has blessed us, our text affirms, "with every spiritual blessing" (1:3). Televangelists often promise that God will bless us with every material blessing. If we have enough faith, some of them promise, God will make us healthy, wealthy, and wise. Paul promised something even better. He promised that God will make us adequate for each task before us, that God will be with us as we face those tasks, and that God will bring us eventually to be with him for all eternity. If we will remember that God's blessings are spiritual in nature, this will protect us from false expectations and will keep us properly focused as we live our Christian lives.

QUESTIONS

1. Why are we so often willing to live beneath our privileges as Christians?

