

LESSON ONE
*God's Lavish
Provisions*

FOCAL TEXT

Ephesians 1

BACKGROUND

Ephesians 1

MAIN IDEA

God has lavishly and graciously provided salvation through Christ, who is Lord over all.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

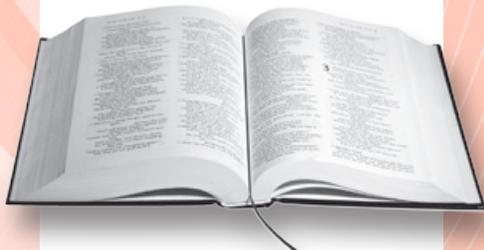
Why do we sometimes think of church as mere duty and obligation—or optional—when God has so lavishly provided salvation for us?

STUDY AIM

To describe God's lavish provisions of salvation through Christ

QUICK READ

God has showered his people with lavish grace so that we can bring glory to him.



When my husband and I were in seminary, we moved into our small apartment in the middle of a hot July weekend. That first Sunday evening we wanted to go to church. We weren't sure where to go, but we had seen a church across the street from our apartment and decided to go there for at least one service.

We slipped in and sat in back, finding familiar comfort in the hymns and Scripture reading. When the service was over, we were warmly welcomed by a crowd of people, including several couples who invited us to join them for a baked potato fellowship. Something in the simple, genuine welcome made it clear that this was where God wanted us to be.

Gambrell Street Baptist was a good congregation for two young seminary students to find their place. So many of the pews were filled by pastors and missionaries who were willing to share their experiences with us. It was a place where we could serve, learn, and worship, and a place where we were known. When I think about the blessings of Christian community, the fellowship we enjoyed at that church stands out to me as how church should be.

Church should be a place of blessing, but sometimes it winds up feeling more like an obligation. In the midst of soccer games and commutes, doctor's bills and carpool lanes, church can sometimes seem like one more thing on the to-do list—something that keeps us from sleeping in instead of a place where we meet God and God's people. God meant for church to be more than that. Church should be a place where we experience the blessings of salvation together with the community of faith and channel those blessings to a waiting world.¹

EPHESIANS 1

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: ² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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.

¹⁵ For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶ I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

We Are Blessed (1:1–10)

Paul often opened his letters with a thanksgiving. In Ephesians, Paul began with a long and complicated blessing. Paul praised God for blessing his people and then listed God’s lavish blessings.

The first year my husband and I were married we set aside a few dollars each month so we could buy presents for each other. That first Christmas Heath was determined to make our little Christmas budget stretch as far as he could, and so he set his alarm to go off before dawn and set out to brave the mall. When Christmas came I couldn’t believe everything he had managed to come up with. He lavished his love on me.

God loves us like that. He doesn’t hold anything back; he isn’t stingy. Instead, God lavishes his blessings on us. We experience God’s blessings in Christ. These spiritual blessings aren’t saved up for us to experience later. God has already poured them out on us from his home in the “heavenly realms” (Ephesians 1:3). We experience God’s blessings as we pursue intimacy with him—an intimacy made available through Christ’s sacrifice for us.

RELIGIOUS LIFE IN EPHESUS

Ephesus was a melting pot of religious pluralism. Although the city was known for the worship of Artemis, the city was home to as many as fifty other gods and goddesses. The city was also known as a center for magic and the occult (Acts 19:13–20). The practice of magic was built on the belief that good and evil spirits were involved in almost every area of life. Magicians believed that they could harness the power of these spirits through rituals, magic spells, and incantations. Many also believed that the stars and planets had the power to control their fate and that their lives could be determined by the movement of the stars. One of the things that drew some people to worship Artemis was that they believed that as the queen of heaven she had the power to change fate. It was important for the Ephesians to understand that God’s power far surpassed any other spiritual power and that it was God, not the stars and planets, who set the course of history.³

Foremost among God's blessings is that God chose us "before the creation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). God knew what choosing us would mean. Revelation tells us that Christ "was slain from the creation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). Before creation began, God saw it all: the garden, the serpent, and the fall. He knew the mess a fallen humanity would make of this world. He saw us in our sin; he saw the wars, the famines, the lies, the hate, and the ones who would mock his name. Over it all, God saw the cross: the only possible path to redeem humanity from our slavery to sin. God knew the price and chose us anyway.

God chose us, but he also chose us for a purpose: "to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph. 1:4). "Blameless" means to be free from blemish or fault. Holiness means *set apart, or reflecting the character of God*. God lovingly predestined us not to sin's slavery but to adoption as sons and daughters of God. It pleased God to call us his own. God's grace is his good and loving intentions toward us revealed in Christ.

God also blessed us by redeeming us from our slavery to sin. "Redemption" means *to be purchased back*. The price of our freedom was the blood of Christ. God blesses us with full and complete "forgiveness"—a forgiveness in agreement "with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us" (1:7).

Although I know what the Bible says about forgiveness, I am often tempted to put limits on my forgiveness of others. At other times I think that my failures disqualify me from God's favor. The truth is that we cannot out-sin the grace of God. There is no sin so great that God cannot forgive and redeem. The weight of our sin is overwhelmed by the wealth of God's lavish grace.

God chose us, forgave us, and blessed us by revealing his will to us. In God's wisdom and understanding, God revealed to us "the mystery of his will" (1:9). When Paul spoke of the mystery of God's will, he was not talking about a problem that has to be solved, like the plot of an Agatha Christie novel. In Paul's letters, a "mystery" describes something that was once hidden and now made known. God's plan for salvation in Christ was hidden from the priests and prophets but is now revealed to the church.

Yet God's plan is not limited to our redemption. God's redemptive plan looks forward to a day at the fullness of time when all creation is

brought into its rightful place under the authority of Christ. Our unity in the church is a foretaste of the day when all of the created order will be united in submission to the Lordship of Christ (Romans 8:19–21).

We Are Chosen (1:11–14)

God’s blessings are made available to us in our unity and submission with Christ. From the beginning God chose us and gave us an eternal destiny in accordance with his will. Our destinies are not determined by the stars, fate, genetics, or chance. Rather, our future is guided by a loving God who works to see that all things ultimately conform to the purpose of his will. This does not mean that everything that happens to us is a part of God’s will but that God is constantly at work to bring our lives into conformity with his redemptive purposes.

God chose us for a purpose: to praise his glory (Eph. 1:11–12). God’s glory shines in our brokenness made whole. When God redeems and transforms saints into sinners, God demonstrates his power as a God of redemption and grace. Both the Jews, “the first to hope in Christ,” and the Gentiles, “you also,” were included in Christ. No longer separate, Jew and Gentile were united together in the body of Christ.

We also find our place in the community of grace. Salvation is not just for those whose parents taught them to toddle through the church doors as soon as they could walk. It’s for all of us. Male and female, mechanics and millionaires, people of all races—all are included in Christ when they hear and believe the good news of our salvation.

When we believed, God marked us with the seal of the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament world a seal was the most common way to express ownership. Valuables, documents, and even slaves or livestock were marked with seals.² The Holy Spirit is a “seal” identifying us as God’s own possession, purchased by Christ’s blood.

The Holy Spirit is also a “deposit” that guarantees our future inheritance. When we buy a home, we have to put down a down payment that allows us to take ownership and guarantees the transaction will be completed. Similarly, the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives is a deposit of the eternal inheritance we will ultimately receive in the presence of God. The Spirit is God’s guarantee that God will keep his promises and finish the redemptive work he has already begun.

HOW TO APPLY THIS LESSON

- Plan a fellowship or worship event together with a congregation from a different language group. Celebrate the unity you have together in Christ.
- Write out your testimony. How has God redeemed and blessed you?
- Put Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1:15–23 in your own words. Pray this prayer for your church.

We Are Known (1:15–23)

After finishing his lengthy blessing, Paul turned to a prayer for the Ephesian church. Paul had heard about the church's faith in God and love for all God's people. Paul's thankfulness for the church's faithfulness overflowed into a prayer of blessing on the congregation.

Paul's first concern was that the church would know God better. For that reason he prayed that they might have a "Spirit of wisdom and revelation"—either a reference to the Holy Spirit or a prayer that they would grow in wisdom and understanding of God (1:17). Paul's intent wasn't just academic knowledge. *Knowing* in the Bible is almost always experiential. Paul's prayer was that they know God intimately—the kind of intimacy gained only through creating your personal history with God.

To that end, Paul prayed that "the eyes of your heart may be enlightened" (1:18). His prayer was that the church would gain supernatural insight and understanding that would help them see and understand what God was doing in and through them.

One of the reasons Paul wanted the church to grow in spiritual insight was so that they would understand "the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (1:18). God has chosen the church for his own inheritance. We are valuable and precious to God.

Our experiences of church don't always match up with the spiritual reality. Sometimes what was meant to be a place of healing becomes a place of wounding. Sometimes church can feel like one more item on the to do list. But it was meant to be more. If God himself regards the church as valuable and precious, shouldn't we?

Paul also wants us to understand God’s “incomparably great power for us who believe” (1:19). The same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is available to us through the Holy Spirit. God raised Christ from the dead and put him in authority over every human and spiritual power in heaven and earth—not only now but for all of eternity. Christ is head over all things, and we—his church—are the body of Christ. Christ’s life and power fills the church, and we fill the world with the glory of God as we share the good news of God’s redeeming work in Christ. We should not fear that we are too small or lack the resources for the task. God’s mighty strength is available to us.

Implications and Actions

God intended the church to be a demonstration of his glory and power, a foretaste of what it looks like to live in the kingdom of God. Sometimes our experience of church falls short of God’s design. Church was meant to be a place of healing, but it can become a place of wounding. Sometimes we mistake activity for God’s presence and assume a full calendar of events is a sign of God’s favor. At other times we make the mistake of thinking it’s all about us—that church is meant to cater to our taste preferences rather to celebrate God’s lavish grace.

Church is meant to be more than that. When we come together as the community of the redeemed, we celebrate God’s work in us and anticipate his coming. We offer a feast of grace to those most hungry for the good news of salvation. We become the hands and feet of Christ, filling the earth with his glory as we spread out taking the gospel to the nations and living it among them. Church is not duty or obligation but a chance to celebrate and participate in God’s redemptive work.

