

LESSON ONE
*God's Lavish
Provisions*

FOCAL TEXT

Ephesians 1

BACKGROUND

Ephesians 1

MAIN IDEA

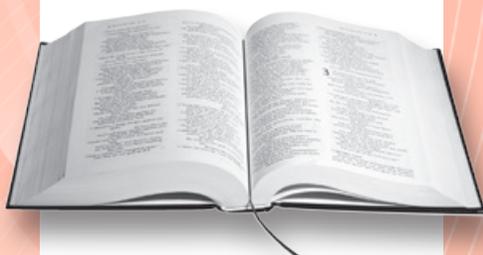
God has lavishly and graciously provided salvation through Christ, who is Lord over all.

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?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to describe God's lavish provisions of salvation through Christ



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

Recent stories in my local newspaper covered sexual harassment in the armed forces, the future of the United States military in Afghanistan, the increase of car thefts in our community, and the lack of progress in the United States Congress to address immigration. While the specific stories may have changed by the time you read this, I suspect they will be similar. The situation appears overwhelming. What ought we to do? Is there any hope?

How Christians ought to live in a non-Christian world is the subject matter of Ephesians 4–6. Before Paul offered guidance on this subject, though, he first established a doctrinal foundation in chapters 1–3. What God has done for people in Christ precedes how God expects Christians to live.

In Ephesians 1:1, Paul introduced himself to his readers as God’s authoritative representative. He also described his readers as holy and faithful followers of Christ.

Ephesians 1:3–23 consists of two major sections. The first section (1:3–14) shows what God has accomplished for believers in Christ and praises God because God had blessed them with every spiritual blessing. The blessings include a permanent salvation, which is characterized both as redemption and as forgiveness of sin. God had adopted Christians as children and sealed them with the Holy Spirit. Paul described God’s free and enduring salvation that enabled Christians to live righteous and holy lives.

The second section (1:15–23) is a prayer for the readers of the letter. Paul offered regular thanks to God for his Christian readers. He prayed that God might continue to grant them growth in their Christian lives. He reminded them of the hope that was theirs in Christ and of the power of God. God had vested Christ, who was seated at God’s right hand, with this power. God’s people may face struggles as they attempt to live godly lives, but God’s power is sufficient to give them success.¹

Interpreting the Scriptures

From Apostle to Saints (1:1–2)

The opening of modern letters may be mere formality, but such was not true in Paul's day. Secular letters in his day offered more than the contemporary, *hey*, or *dear*. . . . The letters in the New Testament are even more detailed as the writers usually offered a personal introduction and a spiritual description of the readers as well.

1:1a. Paul described himself as an “apostle,” that is, one sent on a mission by and with the authority of another. Paul wrote with the authority of Christ, and he expected his readers to heed his instructions. The phrase, “will of God,” reveals that Paul recognized that both his salvation and his role as God's messenger were God's plan for him.

1:1b–2. Paul identified his readers as “saints” who were “faithful in Christ Jesus.” But both the words for “saints” (literally *holy*) and “faithful” are adjectives. One possible way to understand Paul's description of the recipients is that they were *holy and faithful in Christ Jesus*. This expression emphasizes the character of the recipients more than their identity. It also reads smoothly in the Greek since, as is mentioned in “Studying *Letters to the Ephesians and Timothy: Guidance for the Church and Its Leaders*” in the *Adult Bible Study Guide*, the words, “in Ephesus,” are missing from the best manuscripts.

The apostle blessed the readers by wishing for them “grace” and “peace.” Peace can be linked to the Old Testament idea of *shalom*. *Shalom* not only suggests absence of conflict but also wholeness and well-being. In many ways, it is synonymous with salvation.

Spiritual Blessings in Christ (1:3–14)

1:3. The word “blessed,” stresses that God alone is worthy of human worship. God has granted all kinds of spiritual gifts to Christians, not simply the gift of conversion. That the blessings do not come from this world is highlighted by the use of the phrase, “in the heavenly places.” What God had accomplished in the heavens in Christ impacts the world

through the lives of Christians. This spiritual transformation comes through the work of Christ (“in Christ”).

1:4. The first specific aspect of the spiritual blessings is God’s intentionally choosing of persons. The emphasis falls not on who is or is not chosen but on God’s sovereignty and the assurance of God’s power to accomplish God’s will in their lives. Even more specifically, God chose us not simply to experience salvation but to live righteous and pure lives.

1:5–6. A second part of the blessing and part of being chosen is God’s desire to bring us into God’s family as adopted children. God has predestined salvation for those who will receive it. Christians derive a new identity from being God’s children as well as from becoming heirs to divine blessings and power.

Three times in this passage we find words that express praise to God’s grace (“glorious grace,” 1:6; “glory,” 1:12, 14). The glory of God is the revelation of God’s nature. Once again, Paul declared God’s graciousness. God has given Christians this gift through the work of Christ, the “Beloved.”

1:7–8a. Another facet of the blessings Christians receive at conversion and still possess is “redemption,” that is, *release or freedom from sin*. “Forgiveness” comes from a word that indicates that something, in this case sin, is sent away. Sin can mean either a falling away from the right way or the acts that result from separation from God. The word “trespasses” points to the latter in this verse. God’s grace is more than sufficient (“lavished”) to offer forgiveness.

1:8b–10. Another part of the Christian’s blessing in Christ is God’s revelation of the divine plan to bring all things together in Christ. “Mystery” refers not to something hidden but something once hidden that is now made known. The plan is that God will bring history to the end that God chose. At the appropriate time (“fullness of time”), God will fulfill and finalize the work through the power of Christ.

1:11–12. Both Jews and Gentiles are recipients of God’s spiritual blessings. In verse 12, Paul distinguished between them, identifying Jews as

“the first to set our hope on Christ.” Jews were the original recipients of God’s blessing.

1:13–14. These verses focus on the Gentiles’ (“you also”) acceptance of the salvation God offered. Paul’s purpose was not so much to differentiate between the groups but to highlight to Gentiles first and then to Jewish Christians that the Gentiles were now part of God’s adopted family. Gentiles had heard the good news (“gospel”). Paul clarified that hearing alone was not sufficient but that the Gentiles had also *believed* in Christ. That they “were marked with the seal” may refer to water baptism as the sign of their conversion. More importantly it signified that the Gentiles were protected by the authority and power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul described the Spirit as the “pledge” of the inheritance. The “seal of the promised Holy Spirit” was a deposit on a greater inheritance that they would receive. What they had received in Christ was only a fore-taste of what lay ahead for them.

Paul’s Prayer for His Readers (1:15–23)

In the second section of Ephesians 1:3–23, Paul thanked God for the faith and love of the saints. Paul’s prayer unfolded his understanding of God’s power at work among the faithful and the assurance that they would derive from the promise of that power.

1:15–16. “Faith” means two things in this verse. It means holding correct doctrine. We use it in this way when we refer to the content of our faith. The word also indicates the means by which people become members of the community of Christians. Paul mentioned “love” here as well as faith. They directed their “love toward all the saints” (*holy ones*). Paul reminded his readers of his regular prayers for them.

1:17. Paul, even as he prayed for his readers, assumed they would be maturing as Christians. Their growth might be marked with potholes and detours, but because of their commitment to Christ, they would be journeying in the right direction. While their participation was required, God would make growth possible. Paul prayed that they might receive God’s “wisdom and revelation.” The apostle believed God would guide

the community of Christians and each Christian in their pilgrimage. The word “spirit” here refers to the human spirit that is being transformed in Christ.

1:18–19. Three images provide the reason Paul sought wisdom and revelation for the saints: (1) “the hope” to which God had called them; (2) “the riches of his glorious inheritance”; and (3) “the immeasurable greatness of his power.” Each is associated with an “enlightened” heart. “Heart” describes not the place of emotions but the center of knowledge and the will. The imagery highlights one’s spiritual formation. The word “hope” expresses confidence in God, not wishful thinking. The saints could live with an expectation that God would preserve them into their future. Paul longed for the believers to know God’s riches, that is, to be aware of all the resources they had in God. Finally, Paul wanted them to know the magnitude of God’s power. It was overflowing and abundant. They could withstand any trial, tribulation, or temptation because of God’s enormous power. The second part of verse 19, “according to the working of his great power,” adds further emphasis to God’s strength.

1:20–21. The power that is available to Christians is the same power by which God resurrected Christ and placed him at God’s right hand. Being seated at God’s right hand, often considered the strongest hand, is a common symbol of power and authority. God has subjected all powers and institutions to Christ’s authority. Christ is Lord over all things, in this age and in the age to come.

1:22–23. God has made Christ supreme ruler and “head over all things for the church.” Paul added that the church is Christ’s “body.” Through it, Christ impacts the world. The church is the fullness of Christ’s body as it continues and completes Christ’s ministry in our world.

Focusing on the Meaning

God has blessed us as Christians with every spiritual blessing. Salvation (*is-ness*) precedes obligation (*ought-ness*). Before there are expectations, there is acceptance.

Knowing that God has chosen *us* reminds us that we are important to God. Knowing that God has bestowed spiritual blessings on us reminds that we have been forgiven and are no longer alienated from God.

Christians have been adopted into God's family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, responsible for the care of others in Christ's community. Paul's opening words in the salutation reveal also our accountability to each other.

That God has lavished grace and conferred power on us gives us confidence that we can overcome adversity. All the forces this world can marshal against Christians pale in contrast to God's might. We have every resource we need to resist the evil in this world. We can be bold with the assurance of triumph as we have the hope, riches, and greatness of God's power. God's plan will not be thwarted.

The church completes the work of Christ. Christians are the visible body of Christ through which he continues to redeem and transform. The church models appropriate behavior as Christians are holy and faithful. As we live for God, the blessing comes full circle as our action brings further honor and praise to God.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Ask the class whether anyone is or has been a member of an organization that restricted membership and that allowed members certain privileges or prestige. Examples could be athletic or extracurricular teams in school, professional or service organizations, honor societies, even commercial ventures such as frequent-flyer clubs. Lead a discussion with questions such as these, *What did you have to do to get in? What were some of the privileges or other advantages? What were some of the resources within the organization that were useful?*

State that we are about to begin our study of Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. Refer to and summarize "Introducing Ephesians: Now, Through the Church," in the *Adult Bible Study Guide*. Emphasize that Ephesians is all about life in God's church, and this lesson is about the lavish blessings believers have as members of the church.

Guide Bible Study

2. Using the information in the small article in the *Study Guide* titled "Religious Life in Ephesus," and perhaps also other available resources, prepare a mini-lecture about Ephesus in the first century. Be sure to include information from Acts 19:23–31. Note that the city was located on an inland harbor with a short channel to the Aegean Sea. Since it was also at the crossroads of major trade routes, it was a prosperous, multicultural city, one of the most prominent in Asia Minor. Conclude the mini-lecture by asking the class to compare what they understand about Ephesus with their own community.
3. Read Ephesians 1:1–2. Then invite someone to read Ephesians 1:3–10 while the class listens for the word "blessed." Lead the class in brainstorming to generate a list of the *blessings God lavishes on us*. Write responses on the markerboard. Then, brainstorm to generate a second list—or highlight answers on the first list—of *SPIRITUAL blessings God lavishes on us*. Take a few moments to compare the two lists with the passage (Ephesians 1:1–10) and add any additional thoughts to the lists on the markerboard.
4. Enlist someone to read Ephesians 1:11–14. Ask, *What does this passage tell us about membership in God's church? What does it take to become a member?* Refer especially to verse 11 ("in Christ") and verse 13 ("believed in him").

Note that some people fear that Christians can lose their salvation. Ask, *What do you think this passage tells us about the permanence of our salvation?* Refer especially to verses 13–14 ("marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit"; "the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption").

5. Have someone read Ephesians 1:15–23 while the class follows the reading and watches for what Paul prayed for the letter's readers. Prepare a worksheet with the following sentences and blanks. (A copy is available in "Teaching Resource Items" for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org.) You can provide one copy to each person or form small groups for a group exercise. (See Eph. 1:17–19a for words for the blanks.)

Read Ephesians 1:17–19a and complete this outline:

Paul prayed for God the Father to give believers a spirit of _____
and _____ so that they may _____.

Paul also prayed that _____
so that they may know _____,
_____, and _____.

Encourage Application

6. Divide the class into small groups of six or fewer people each. Provide paper and markers for each group. Say that your class has been asked to come up with marketing materials about membership in your church—advertisements, brochures, social media campaigns, etc. Instruct each group to take five minutes to prepare something that would promote your church to your community based on Ephesians 1. After a few minutes of work, call the group to attention again and ask each group to review their work to determine whether it conveys the spiritual blessings that are part of God's plan for the church as outlined in this passage of Ephesians. Then, allow another two to three minutes for revision. Call for each group to present their work.
7. Conclude with prayer as you (or another reader) re-read Ephesians 1:17–23. Consider using a different translation of the Bible from what you have used so far in this lesson.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Announce to the class that tomorrow will be *Super Power Day*. Each person will be given the super power of his or her choice for one twenty-four-hour period. Allow a minute or two for people to think about what one super power they would choose and what they would do with it. Call for responses, but monitor the time. After a time of sharing, say, *We are going to talk about the super power God has given to all believers and the other ways God has lavished spiritual resources on us.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Prepare and present a brief lecture about Ephesus (as described in Step 2 under “Teaching Plans—Varied Learning Activities”).
3. Read, or have a volunteer read, Ephesians 1:1–10 as the class follows in their Bibles or the Scripture passage printed in their *Study Guides*. Instruct the class to look for words or phrases that describe ways God has lavished blessings on believers and perhaps to underline them. Invite responses.

Refer to and read Ephesians 1:4 again. Offer insights on the meaning of the verse, using information in the *Study Guide* and in “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*.

4. Enlist someone to read Ephesians 1:11–14. Share information on these verses from the *Study Guide* and “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*. Call attention especially to the concept of a seal as a way to express ownership. Ask, *Can you think of some examples of seals or other ways that express a similar idea today?* Examples might include a sales receipt, writing a name on an item, a laundry mark, or wearing a T-shirt for a team or other organization. Then say, *Although the presence of the Holy Spirit is not visible, how does the Holy Spirit identify a believer as God’s own possession, purchased by Christ’s blood?*

5. State that Ephesians 1:3–10 outlines the blessings God has lavished on believers and verses 11–14 tell us about how we as believers have been chosen to be part of God's church. The next section, Ephesians 1:15–23, is Paul's prayer for believers to comprehend what these blessings of salvation promise. Have someone read Ephesians 1:15–23. Again, ask class members to watch for the words or phrases that indicate what Paul prays for believers, perhaps underlining them in their Bibles or *Study Guides*.

Refer to paragraph four of the section in the *Study Guide* under the heading, "We Are Known (1:15–23). Point out the sentences that read, "God has chosen the church for his own inheritance. We are valuable and precious to God." Then refer to the first sentence of the next paragraph, "Our experiences of church don't always match up with the spiritual reality." Ask the class to name some ways that the church, either your own church or the larger church, sometimes fails to match up with God's intentions. Ask, *Do you think that someone who is new to Christianity or to church-going would have different expectations of a church than someone who has been a church member for many years? In what ways? Why?*

After a few minutes of discussion, ask, *What might be some changes that would help ensure people's experiences match up with the spiritual ideal? in the church? in this class? in your personal actions and attitudes?*

Encourage Application

6. Recall the comments from step 1 regarding super powers that people would choose. Now say, *God has promised the super power of his Holy Spirit to dwell and work in us believers. Think about and envision the power of God's Spirit; then think of at least one thing that super power working in you could help you accomplish.* Allow a few moments for thought, and then invite people who are willing to do so to share their thoughts.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1-4 and 8-11 are from the New Revised Standard Version.