

Building Biblical
COMMUNITY in CHRIST

What's So Great About Being A Christian?

Ephesians 1:3-4

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. Eph 1:3-4

In the movie *The Princess Diaries*, Mia Thermopolis (played by Anne Hathaway) is a shy, awkward teenager whose only goal in life is to be invisible. She tries to get through each day with as little attention and embarrassment as possible. But her world is turned upside down when her estranged grandmother arrives to tell her that she is actually a princess. Here's what happens (video clip).ⁱ

Maybe your goal in life is to be "invisible." Maybe you feel that your life is going nowhere. Every now and then as you daydream you get just a glimpse of what it would be like to be significant, to be part of something wonderful, to feel valuable, and to have a thrilling destiny. But then you wake up once again faced with those same old burdensome thoughts and feelings of insignificance.

The Bible has some good news for you! And even if you don't have the feelings experienced by Mia Thermopolis, the verses we're going to look at today and in the next few weeks will give us all an entirely new perspective on just how great it is to be a Christian.

*Building Biblical
Community in Christ*
Ephesians

		CALLING			CONDUCT			CONFLICT					
		To Spiritual Blessings	By Reconciliation	According to God's Purpose	In Unity	In Newness	In Submission	In Warfare					
Introduction	1:1	1:3	1:15	2:1	3:1	3:2	Conclusion	3:14	4:1	4:17	5:21	6:10	6:21
					Paraphrase: Paul's Testimony								
		"Know" 1:18	"Remember" 2:11	"Don't lose heart" 3:13					"Walk worthy" 4:1			"Put on" 6:11	
Our Heritage Together in Christ					➔	Our Life Together in Christ							
"I pray that you may know your resources in Christ."						"I pray that you may live consistent with your identity."							

As you can see from our outline of Ephesians, we are in the first section of this book that deals with our *calling* in Christ. In chapter 1, the key word is "know," as in verse 18 where Paul prays that we might *know* all the spiritual wealth that we have together in Christ (chart). Benjamin Disraeli, the well known 19th century British prime minister, once said, "The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches, but to reveal to him his own."ⁱⁱ And that's what Paul does in these verses - he reveals to us the unbelievable wealth that you and I have inherited in Christ. He speaks of our *identity*. He speaks of our *destiny*. And both of these imply a lot about our *security*.

I. Our Identity

The first thing (and this will be our focus this morning) that I want us to notice in this passage is our new *identity* in Christ. And Paul tells us several things about this which should certainly kick us out of any "Mia Thermopolis" syndrome that we might be in.

A. We are blessed (3)

Notice what he says in verse 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.

Praise=Bless

In our English bibles we don't catch the emphasis of the intentional word play that Paul uses here. The word "praise" in the beginning of the verse and the word "blessed" in the middle of the verse are the same word in Paul's Greek language.

Just yesterday we celebrated the life of Jim Lawrie now home with the Lord. And in the program was a section entitled "eulogy." And that is precisely the word that Paul uses here. We bless God because He has blessed us; we *eulogize* God because He has *eulogized* us. In fact, this entire paragraph (verse 3-14) follows the pattern of a Psalm of Praise in the OT. There is first a call to praise which we have here in verse 3; then the reasons for praise, followed by a renewed call to praise.

Spiritual Blessings

Why are we to bless God? Because he has blessed us in the heavenly realms with *every spiritual blessing* in Christ. By that expression "every spiritual blessing" Paul is simply speaking of all the spiritual benefits or enrichments which we have in Christ and which are explained in greater detail in the following verses.

In Christ

But notice where these blessings can be experienced - they are "*in Christ*." Last week we pointed out that this word "in" is the "biggest, little word" in the epistle. It is like a small key that opens a large door that leads us into a vast storehouse of treasure. Taken together with the expressions "in him" and "in whom" it occurs more than 90 times in this book, eleven of which are in chapter one alone! I would encourage you to read and study this week each one of the passages mentioned on your notes where the expression "in Christ" is found.

All of the blessings of salvation and security and forgiveness and peace come in one great package, "*in Christ*." "*In Christ*" speaks of our position, our possessions, our privileges and our practice as believers. We cannot buy these blessings. You can't send off ten dollars in the mail for a special give-away offer. No, you can claim them only to the degree that you are "*in Christ*." ⁱⁱⁱ

When I am tempted to fall into the “Mia Thermopolis” syndrome, I think of who I am in Christ. Where He is, I am. What He has, I have. When you feel weak and insignificant, you remind yourself of who you are in Christ. When you are beat up by emotional pain, you find strength in who you are in Christ. When you struggle with temptation and sin, you respond, “I am in Christ and I am no longer under the penalty and power of sin.” Ian Thomas used to say, “Any demand made upon me is a demand made upon the One who indwells me; therefore, I am not alone facing the demands of life.” In the weeks to come, we will see more and more of the implications of our newfound identity “in Christ.”

In The Heavenly Realms

Why are we to bless God? Not only because we are blessed “in Christ,” but also because this takes place “*in the heavenly realms.*” This is where we have all of these blessings in Christ. Paul here is not talking about heaven or about going to heaven when you die. After all, many Christians have a rather negative view of heaven - boring church services all day, formal white robes, unstrung harps out of tune. Of course, these are all caricatures and far from the truth. But many think that this is what Paul is referring to here.

This expression “in the heavenly realms” occurs five times in this letter (1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12):

“which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand *in the heavenly realm...*” Eph 1:20

“And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him *in the heavenly realms* in Christ Jesus...” Eph 2:6

“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities *in the heavenly realms...*” Eph 3:10

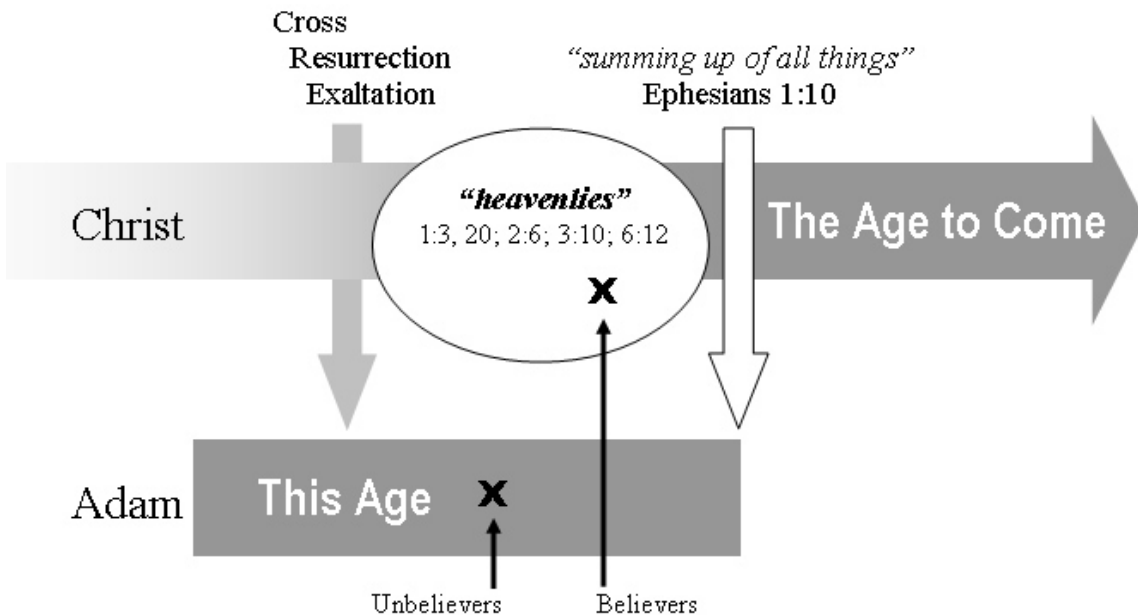
“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil *in the heavenly realms.*” Eph 6:12

What are the “heavenly realms?” It is the realm in which Christ reigns and his people with him (1:20; 2:6) and where we are blessed (1:3). But it is also

the realm in which the powers operate (3:10; 6:12) who oppose God’s work in us and in the world. In every passage, except Ephesians 1:3, the “powers” of evil are mentioned in the immediate context. But because we are in Christ and in the realm in which Christ reigns, we are not in a weak and highly vulnerable position with respect to the evil powers that attack us! We face the powers from a position of victory!

So this expression is not talking about some ethereal something out in space somewhere. And it certainly doesn’t mean being so “heavenly minded that you are of no earthly good.” No, Paul is referring to the invisible realities of our everyday lives: our thought life, our attitudes, our way of viewing ourselves and others.

To grasp what Paul is saying we need to view the world and this present age as the Bible does. At the risk of being overly technical, maybe a visual picture can help.



Humanity, apart from Christ, exists on one plane referred to as “this present age” (Eph 1:21; Titus 2:12). The head of this humanity is Adam (Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 25). This present age will one day come to a screeching stop at what Paul calls the “summing up of all things” (1:10). All unbelievers are part of this fallen humanity destined to corruption and destruction.

But there is another plane of life on which you and I can live, even right now in the here and now. Because of Christ’s death, resurrection and exaltation

(1:19-23), we who believe have been placed “in Christ” and are now identified with him in the heavenly realms. We have been lifted to a new sphere of existence. Because of this, and to the degree that we appropriate it by faith, we can experience *already* what one day we will experience *fully*. We taste already - though not fully - of the age to come with all its promised peace, fulfillment and relational unity.

For the meantime, however, we live in two spheres which creates for us something of a tension. This is sometimes referred to as the “already” but “not yet” of Ephesians. Notice on the chart: we are *already* in Christ and empowered to live this new life. But we are *not yet* experiencing the full blessings of the age to come. In this sense, we exist on both planes - still on this side of the “age to come” and yet also in Christ. No wonder Paul begins this letter by writing to those who are both “in Ephesus” and “in Christ.” In effect, they have two homes. And so do we. We reside “in Portland.” But our real identity is “in Christ.” And we need to keep in mind this balance. Some believers think that being “in Christ” means to completely withdraw from this world. Others focus so much on the “in Ephesus” (or “in Portland”) that they forget their real identity and citizenship in Christ and in the age to come.

B. We are chosen (4)

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

As we come to verse 4 we see that we are not only *blessed in Christ*, but more specifically we are *chosen in Christ*. But this is where we run into difficulty. Many read into this passage the idea that some are “chosen” to salvation and some are not. Others go so far as to say that some are “chosen” to salvation and others are “chosen” to damnation. Is that what Paul is saying here? I don’t think so.

Where? In Christ the “Elect One”

Two important concepts will help us understand this, and again I am going to take them in reverse order of what is found in your notes. Notice first that this “election” or “choice” of verse 4 is “in Christ,” i.e. it is based upon our relationship to Jesus Christ the Elect One.

In both the Old and New Testament Jesus is presented as the Elect One of God. Isaiah 42:1, in speaking of the coming Messiah, says: “*Here is my*

servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight.” God the Father, in speaking of His son, says: “A voice came from the cloud, saying, “*This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him*” (Luke 9:35-36). And then, Peter puts it this way: “*As you come to him, the living Stone-rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him- For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone.*” 1 Peter 2:4,6

The emphasis in Ephesians 1 is all placed on Christ, not on us. We must be very careful to never belittle the work of Christ. And we can do that by placing the emphasis on “us” or - worse yet - on you and me as individuals in this passage rather than on Christ.

It is not that God looked down and chose you and then, based on that call, irresistibly drew you to himself and then placed you in Christ. The focus is rather on Christ himself. He is the elect one of God the Father and it is only in him that we receive forgiveness and salvation. To the degree that we are in Christ, we share in his election.

Maybe an analogy can help us understand this. When the Bible says that the descendants of Jacob, and not Esau, were chosen, it does not mean that they were chosen to be *put into* Jacob, but that they were chosen *in* Jacob. They were chosen because they were part of the chosen race. Take, for example, Ruth the Moabitess. When she became an Israelite, she became part of the chosen nation of Israel and by virtue of that was part of God’s chosen ones. Israel’s election became her election. In the same way, when one believes the gospel (cf. Eph 1:13), he or she is placed in Christ and Christ’s election become his election. To be chosen *in* Christ is not at all the same as being chosen to be *placed into* Christ.^{iv}

But there is more. In these verses Paul places the emphasis not only on Christ, but also on the Church, the Body of Christ. And the two are inseparable. Just as the election of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament was corporate and not individual, so the election of the church is corporate and not individual. This is seen in the plural pronouns that he uses throughout this letter. God chose “us” *in* Christ, not “me” *to be placed in* Christ. God chose the *church in* Christ, not *individuals to be placed in* Christ. The election that Paul speaks of here is a *corporate* election, not an *individual* election. In other words, we are not in the church, the Body of Christ, because we are elect. We are elect because we are in the Church, the Body of Christ.

How? According to the Foreknowledge of God.

A second key concept that can help us understand this biblical doctrine of election is what is called the “foreknowledge of God.”^v This explains *how* our election took place. While there are many passages in both the Old Testament and New Testament where this term is used, the most helpful is 1 Peter 1:2 where it is linked with this truth of election or choice:

“...who have been *chosen according to the foreknowledge of God* the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood...”

It’s clear that God’s choice of us in Christ is based on his foreknowledge. Personally, I don’t believe that means that God knew we would believe and be placed in Christ. Because of the use of this word in other passages, it seems to be saying this: God looked down through the corridor of time and saw those who believe, i.e. the church, in Christ. Again, all the emphasis is on Christ, and not on us. Because Christ is chosen, you and I are chosen. Because Christ is worthy, you and I are worthy.

I have here a hand made crystal flower vase that some family members recently gave to us. It is carefully and finely crafted. To illustrate the truths that we spoken of, I’ll let this crystal vase represent Christ. I also have here some gravel stones taken from my walkway. Since the Bible elsewhere describes you and me as “living stones,” I’ll let these gravel stones represent you and me.

This passage in Ephesians - or for that matter other Bible passages - does not teach that God decided to place you and me in Christ and to not place certain others in Christ. I believe that such teaching misrepresents what the Bible says about election. It is rather that God chose Christ, the Elect One, as the means of salvation (hold up the vase). He also ordained, to the praise of His grace, that anyone could be placed into Christ through grace and faith, rather than through law and works (hold up a stone). Later in this chapter, Paul refers to the Ephesians who were the “first to hope in Christ.” As we respond in faith to God’s display of grace, we are placed in Christ, the Elect One (place stone in vase). As we are place in Christ by grace through faith, we are joined with other believers who are also “in Christ” (place other stones into the vase). Peter says that we are “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God.” That means that God looked down the corridor of time and saw the church, i.e. believers, in His Son.

Why? To be holy and blameless.

We've seen *where* our election takes place (it is "in Christ") and *how* (it is "according to the foreknowledge of God"). Now Paul tells us *why* we are elected.

This word "chosen" or "elect" is used in many different ways in the New Testament.^{vi} In the message notes which you can access on our web site, I list out the majority of the passages where this word and concept are found. As you study these passages, you see that the basic idea is that of being *called to a privilege, responsibility or task to perform*. We are always "chosen" or "elected" *to* something. And this is also true in this verse.

Paul is very careful in choosing his words here. Notice, we are not chosen *to be placed into Christ*, but we are chosen *in Christ to be holy and blameless*. In other words, our election does not concern how we *become* Christians, but rather what we have been called or "elected to" *as* Christians. In other words, God chose in eternity past that we who are in Christ would be holy and blameless in his presence in eternity future.

And that really is the meaning of the little words "before him." They refer to one day standing before God. The same expression is found in Jude 24 – "*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.*" In other words, what God has started in us He will complete. How do we know that? Because of this doctrine of election. Those who are *in Christ* will, most assuredly, be made like Christ!

When? Before the foundation of the world.

Finally, notice that you and I as believers as those "in Christ" were chosen before the foundation of the world! Now I don't know how that makes you feel, but that can kick me out of any "Mia Thermopolis" syndrome. I recall well the childhood pain of being chosen last for the baseball or basketball team. I remember the captains coming down to their last reluctant choices, needing someone to stick out in left field where nobody hits the ball. "If I take him, then you gotta take him," they mutter. I found myself more than once being part of the excess, the leftovers - chosen last!

But in Christ, that is all different! In Christ I and we who believe were chosen before the foundation of the world-and with enthusiasm!

So all that you could ever daydream of – being significant, feeling valuable, being part of something wonderful, having an assured destiny – it is all yours in Christ. That’s what so great about being a Christian!

ⁱ *The Princess Diaries* (Walt Disney, 2001), rated G, written by Meg Cabot, Gina Wendkos, Bob Brunner and Audrey Wells, directed by Gary Marshall. Scene begins at 12:56 and ends at 15:50. Illustration taken from 2005 PreachingToday.com & Christianity Today International.

ⁱⁱ *Citation*: Submitted by Marshall Shelley, Wheaton, Illinois

ⁱⁱⁱ Often reference is made to John 15:16 – “*You did not choose me, but I chose you ...*” And yet in this passage Jesus is not calling the disciples to salvation, but to a particular role or task and privilege, i.e. to be part of his inner circle of disciples. In this sense, Judas who betrayed Jesus was also “chosen,” though he fell away. So this choosing has nothing to do with whether a person goes to heaven or hell. It is rather the appointing to a particular task, responsibility or privilege.

^{iv} Roger T. Forster and V. Paul Marston, *God’s Strategy in Human History* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1973), 130-139. We saw the same truth as we studied Romans 9-11 some months ago. The nation of Israel was chosen for a particular task or privilege, to be the vehicle through which the Messiah would come. Abraham was chosen by God in Genesis 12 and that choosing was all of grace. But does that mean that Abraham alone was saved and Lot was not? No, the New Testament even calls Lot a “righteous man” (2 Pet. 2:7). You see, God choosing Abraham was not so much for his salvation, but in order that through Abraham blessing would come to the nations. The same is true of God’s choice of Isaac over Ishmael. Does this mean that Ishmael *as an individual* was never brought into a right standing with God? No, not at all. In fact, the Bible says that “God was with the boy as he grew up” (Gen 21:20). Again, God’s choice or election is dealing with a specific role or privilege.

^v In the New Testament, the word “foreknowledge” is made up of two words “to know” and “previously.” The word “know” (Greek: *ginosko*) is used in the following ways in the Old and New Testaments: (a) *to perceive*: 1 John 3:24; Mark 13:38; Luke 7:39; (b) *to understand*: John 8:43; John 10:6; Acts 8:30; (c) *to know experientially*: Micah 3:1; 4:9; Zeph. 3:5; Heb. 3:10; (d) *to acknowledge*: Deut. 33:9; 1 Chron. 28:9; Job 19:13; (e) *to recognize*: Luke 24:35; Matthew 12:33; 1 Kings 20:41 (LXX the Greek Old Testament); (f) *knowledge of persons*: Matthew 25:24; John 2:24, 25; 1:47, 48; 5:42; Psalm 139:1,2,6; Jeremiah 12:3; (g) *implying a special relationship with people*: 1 John 2:24; 4:7; Matthew 7:23; Hosea 6:3,4; Genesis 4:1; Luke 1:34. Those who interpret the word “know” or “foreknowledge” to mean “choose” usually refer to four passages: Amos 3:2,3; Hosea 13:5; Genesis 18:17-19; Jeremiah 1:5,6. The word “foreknowledge” is used seven times in the New Testament in the following verses: Acts 2:23; 26:4-5; Romans 8:28-30; 11:2; 1 Peter 1: 1-2; 18-20; 2 Peter 3:17. See also John 7:24 where Jesus says that God loved him before the foundation of the world and Pet 1:20 where Christ was foreknown before the foundation of the world.

^{vi} Of Christ (Luke 9:35; 23:35; 1 Peter 2:4; 2:6), of the church in Christ (Romans 8:33; Eph 1:4; Col 3:12; 1 Thess 1:4; 2 Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:2; 2:9; 5:13; 2 Pet. 1:10; Rev. 17:14), of the nation of Israel (Acts 13:17; Rom. 9:11; 11:28), of believers in the nation of Israel (Romans 11:5,7), of the twelve apostles (Lk 6:13; Jn 6:70; 13:18; 15:16, 19; Acts 1:2, 24, 25), and of Paul (Acts 9:15 cf. 22:14 and 1 Corinthians 9:1, 15).