

God Blessed You, and You Didn't Even Sneeze

Ephesians 1:1-14

#1 in our series from Paul's letter to the Ephesians

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Message

Ephesians 1:1-14:

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

Now begins the longest sentence in the Bible, verses 3-14. It's like an uncontrolled explosion of praise. The ESV has broken it up into four sentences, but it's all one sentence. Today I want to focus on verse 3, but for context we'll read the whole sentence.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be [exist] to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1:3 says this: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." This raises a fascinating question: Who could bless God? And why would God want to be blessed by us or by Paul? And why would Paul *want* to bless God?

When I watch TV preachers, they promise God's blessings and define them as financial blessings, relational blessings, and health blessings. But Paul is in prison, probably in Rome, toward the end of his life. Paul has *no* financial blessings. (Read 1 Timothy, and you'll see.) Most of his relationships are broken or severely strained. His health is failing; his eyes are shot. He has a "thorn in his flesh, a messenger from Satan," and soon he is going to be beheaded! By worldly standards, Paul is a failure. In his own words he is "the scum of the earth, the off-scouring of all things," and he writes:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Is St. Paul smoking crack? We'd prefer something like this: "God has blessed us with a Hyundai Sonata in every garage." But "spiritual blessing in the heavenly places"? What's that?

We think “spiritual” means, like, nothing. Maybe love or truth—just vague ideas lacking in substance. And “heavenly places” means, like, nowhere. So “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” really means “all of nothing in nowhere.”

And what is a blessing?

I’m a pastor, so on holidays relatives say, “Peter, would you bless the food?” What does that mean? “In the name of Jesus, I bless you, cold ham and scalloped potatoes.”

Sometimes people say, “Lord, bless this food to our bodies.” And under my breath I’m thinking, “Please don’t bless it to my body. Let the chocolate cake pass right through.” That would be a real blessing.

I’ve heard people yell, “God bless it!” which sounds like code for “God damn it!”

But mostly I’ve been blessed when I’ve sneezed. People say, “God bless you,” and yet I don’t feel any different. So “God bless you” must mean something like “I acknowledge the dry booger in your nose” or “God knows your boogers” or “God would like you to cover your mouth.”

[Comedian Dane Cook clip]

*He sneezed. Debris. Movement. Now at this point, I’m disgusted, and I’m grossed out by it. At first I think, “I’m going to go off on this guy.” And then I decided, “Wait a second, Dane. Don’t do that. Take the high road. Try to be polite.” So I turned to him, and this is what I said: “God bless you.” I said it like that. “God bless you.” Which, you know, is God bless you, but it kinda sounded like, “Cover your ***** mouth”...incognito. I say, “God bless you,” by the way, when someone sneezes. I don’t say, “Bless you,” because I’m not the Lord. I can’t do that. I’m just a messenger for Big Guns upstairs, do you know what I’m saying?*

So what’s a blessing? In Greek, the word is *eulogia*, from *eu* meaning “good” and *logos* meaning “word.” It’s where we get our word “eulogy”—a “good word.” The verb *eulogeo* translates into the Hebrew word *barak* meaning “to bless.” So regardless of your political persuasion, “Barak” is a pretty good name for a little boy with no daddy.

The Bible is basically the story of the *eulogia*, the blessing. God speaks a good word, and creation happens. In Genesis 1:28, “God blessed them male and female [*Adam*].” Next, He blesses the seventh day, then Noah and his sons. In Genesis 12 God blesses Abraham, who is “blessed to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.” Then things really get wild as we follow the drama of this promised blessing, this promised seed. Esau despises his birthright, so Jacob steals the blessing. Along about 0, everyone wondered, “Where’s the blessing?” Maybe Abraham sneezed, and God just said, “Bless you, Abraham,” but He meant, “Cover your mouth.”

In 1986 two psychologists, Gary Smalley and John Trent, published a great little book entitled *The Blessing*. In it they isolate five components of a Biblical blessing:

- 1) Meaningful touch, like the holy kiss
- 2) A spoken message (that is, a *logos* or word)
- 3) A word that attaches high value to the one being blessed
- 4) A word that pictures a special future of the one being blessed
- 5) A word that expresses an active commitment to fulfill the blessing

In Scripture, the blessing usually comes through the father. And Paul has just been talking about God the Father. When we think of it that way, God's blessing begins to feel a little more important.

In their book, Smalley and Trent identify seven types of people that are produced from what they call "blessing deprivation":

- 1) The Seekers: They search all their life for intimacy but can't handle intimacy once they get it.
- 2) The Shattered: Fear, anxiety, depression, and emotional withdrawal are their symptoms.
- 3) The Smotherers: They are like sponges that suck every bit of emotional energy and life from spouses, children, and friends, groping for a blessing that those people cannot give.
- 4) The Angry: They are emotionally chained to their parents in anger. Their life is gripes, complaints, and bitterness.
- 5) The Detached: "Better to be lonely than wounded" is their motto.
- 6) The Driven: They try to earn the blessing with accomplishments. But if you earn the blessing, it's not the blessing, because the blessing is a gift. It's grace.
- 7) The Seduced: They nurture addictions to cover the pain.

Seeking, shattered, smothering, angry, detached, driven, and seduced people. It pretty much sounds like everyone I know...at least to some degree. Maybe we all suffer from blessing deprivation. So even if we deny it, maybe we all have daddy issues.

[Clip from the Austin Powers movie *Goldmember*.]

Austin Powers: *Now who has my father?*

Dr. Evil: *Uh-oh! Someone has some daddy issues!*

Austin Powers: *Nothing could be my father from the truth.*

Dr. Evil: *Ooh! You said "my father."*

Austin Powers: *No, I dadn't.*

Dr. Evil: *How!*

Austin Powers: *Didn't. Did not.*

Dr. Evil: *Shabah!*

Austin Powers: *For me, this is a dad issue.*

Dr. Evil: *Huh!*

Austin Powers: *Dead issue! Dead dad! Deadbeat dad! Daddy didn't love me!*

[Austin Powers and his psychedelic groovy band sing:]

*When I was first baptized
When I was criticized
When I was ostracized
When I was jazzercized*

*Steak and kidney pies
When I was modernized
When I was circumcised
Daddy wasn't there*

*To take me to the fair
To change my underwear
Daddy wasn't there
Daddy wasn't there, peace*

Austin doesn't have peace. He's driven to earn his father's blessing. And it turns out that Dr. Evil doesn't have peace either. He's detached and angry because he lost his father in a car accident and was raised by evil Belgians. Fat Bastard is another character in the movie. "Bastard" is a terrible term that is used to refer to children born outside of the covenant of marriage, born of a father not committed to the child or the mother, born without the covenant blessing...illegitimate.

About 18 years ago, a single mother came to my church. She had the cutest little boy. She was dating a guy, but everyone could tell that he wasn't the boy's father. He was white, and she was white, and Jarek was chocolate brown. And I remember that Jarek just could not sit still. He was always looking for trouble. He could not stop. He could not rest. He could not Sabbath. He could not enjoy that blessed Seventh Day.

I think we're all like Jarek. Deep down inside we're all terrified that we're illegitimate. So we find trouble, and we laugh at Austin Powers movies to keep from crying over our own daddy issues.

Eight and a half years ago, March 8, 2004, I received a wonderful e-mail from a man named Bob. He wrote that in prayer he felt that God told him to ask my father (Dan Hiatt) to bless him. He explained that he had asked his father for ten years, and his father refused to give him a blessing, saying, "You need to get your own blessing." Bob asked if I thought it was possible. I had to write back and say, "I'm sorry, Bob, but today, March 8, my father passed away."

I think we all long for the father's blessing, and so we all suffer the symptoms of blessing deprivation. I see all seven symptoms in me, sometimes all at once, and I had a great father who consistently gave me his blessing.

Maybe it's not that we haven't been blessed. Maybe we haven't been able to believe and receive the blessing. Esau despised his birthright, and thus the blessing, and then missed the blessing. Maybe we despise it and miss it because we think it's nothing...when, in fact, it's everything.

So Paul writes:

Blessed be God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ who blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing.

What's a spiritual blessing?

Is a person a spiritual blessing? How does God make a person, a *nephesh*? Doesn't He breathe His Spirit, His *Ruakh*, into some clay? Last weekend I did a funeral for a man who shot himself in the head. He had lost his father and lost hope. His mother was a saint. She sat in the front row weeping. Is her son a spiritual blessing? Will she get him back? Am I a spiritual blessing? Will God get me back?

In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes that Christ became a "life-giving Spirit." In 1 Corinthians and Ephesians, Paul writes that Christ will "fill all things." So doesn't that mean all things are or will become spiritual blessings? And are spiritual blessings just ideas lacking in substance?

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul teaches that we'll receive a "spiritual body," immortal rather than mortal, imperishable rather than perishable, a spiritual body like Christ's body. And remember when Christ rose from the dead? His new body could pass through walls.

So was His body less real than the walls or more real than the walls? Are spiritual blessings like truth and love less real or more real than this world? According to Scripture, the Truth is Jesus, and God is Love. There can be nothing more real than God, and God created all things with His good Word, that is, Jesus, the Truth. All substance is continually dependent on God's Love.

So Paul writes, "You have been [not *will be*] blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."

Ephesians 2:6: "You have been seated in the heavenly places with Christ." So when and where are the heavenly places?

Do you remember what Jesus came preaching? "The kingdom of Heaven is at hand." In Greek that means...*at* hand, here and now. So check this out: All things are created by God's good Word, His Blessing. And all things are filled with, or are being filled with, that Word, that Blessing...Jesus.

We are created by God's Blessing, and we are, or are being, filled with that Blessing. The life of that Blessing, the wine of the kingdom, is Jesus. So "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" is definitely not nothing in nowhere, but more like everything in everywhere...filling my nothing and my nowhere.

"Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" is all things filled with love and radiating truth; all things saturated with a shared eternal life, saturated with grace, the wine of the kingdom, the blood of Christ. You have been (not *will be*) blessed in Christ with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."

This raises a rather obvious question: If I have all these blessings, how come I don't *feel* blessed? How come I don't taste the wine of the kingdom? Even after we find Christ (like a tree of luscious fruit in a garden), even after we take the blessing, why does the drink not satisfy? And why does the banquet taste like ash in our mouths? Why?

[Barbossa in a movie clip from *Pirates of the Caribbean*]

And there be the chest...and inside be the gold. We took 'em all! We spent 'em, traded 'em, and fritted 'em away, for drink and food and pleasurable company. But the more we gave 'em away, the more we came to realize: The drink would not satisfy, food turned to ash in our mouths, and all the pleasure of company in the world could not slake our lust. We are cursed men, Miss Turner. Compelled by greed, we were. But now, we are consumed by it.

Look! The moonlight shows us for what we really are. We are not among the living, so we cannot die, but neither are we dead. For too long I've been parched of thirst and unable to quench it. Too long I've been starving to death and haven't died. I feel nothing. Not the wind on my face, nor the spray of the sea, nor the warmth of a woman's flesh.

[Barbossa steps into moonlight becoming a skeleton.]

You best start believing in ghost stories, Miss Turner. You're in one!

[Barbossa drinks from a bottle of wine, and it pours right out of him. Other ghosts laugh in the background.]

What are you looking at? Back to work!

Maybe we're like ghosts in a ghost story inside the real story. Maybe we're experiencing a curse inside of a blessing, experiencing a curse for the sake of a blessing, consigned to disobedience for the sake of mercy.

Well, whatever the case, we think Heaven is a change in our circumstances, and certainly there's something to that. But maybe more than a change in my circumstances, Heaven is a change in *me*.

Maybe the problem isn't the wine of the kingdom but my ability to taste the wine. Maybe I'm surrounded by love, upheld by love, a kingdom of love, and yet I don't have a capacity for love because I take love and use love and think I've earned love and therefore own love and so cannot perceive love. Maybe I don't have a capacity for love—real love. Maybe I haven't acquired a taste for grace.

Grace is the wine of the kingdom of Heaven.

If you asked me to picture Heaven, I'd picture myself stuck on a tropical island with my wife and a bottle of wine. If you asked me to picture Hell, I might picture myself stuck on a tropical island with my wife while having a fight. I might drink the wine but not for the same reason.

Have you ever noticed how two people can be in the exact same situation and it's Heaven for one and Hell for the other? Maybe Heaven is getting stuck on an island with our Heavenly Father and everyone He chooses to bless.

A friend of mine tore this out of the newspaper for me. Opus the penguin is talking to Lola Granola.

Opus Comic Strip

Opus: Lola, it's nice to have you back from your last spiritual retreat.

Lola: Alas, they never did warm to the idea of nude yoga.

Opus: The Amish are like that.

Lola: But they sure liked Heaven. I like Heaven too.

Opus: Do you think all people get to Heaven, Lola?

Lola: Every single one.

Opus: Liberals? Evolutionists? Feminists? ACLU lawyers?

Lola: Yep.

Opus: Kennedy Democrats? French people? Manly women who don't shave? They're all up there?

Lola: Yep.

Opus: With Jerry Falwell?

Lola: Yep.

[Open looks exhausted at the thought]

Opus: Goodness must He be annoyed!

Lola: Yep.

Now, I have more in common with Jerry Falwell than Lola Granola. I'm just saying that perhaps one person's eternal blessing is another person's eternal punishment—eternal punishment until *they change*, because eternal things don't change. Only our names for them change.

So maybe Heaven isn't a change in my circumstances so much as a change in me. Maybe the wine of the kingdom is "an acquired taste" (C. S. Lewis).

When I was two or three years old, I didn't like wine. And if you had put me on a tropical beach with a 21-year-old Susan Hiatt in a string bikini, it would've been Hell for everyone involved. I remember trying to explain the "birds and bees" to Jonathan years ago, and he said, "Dad, stop talking. You're freakin' me out!" And I said, "But one day this might be some interesting information." I remember Elizabeth crying because she didn't want breasts. I said, "Well, honey, don't make any rash decisions, because one day you might feel a bit different."

Maybe sin is like a rash decision, because we don't trust that God can one day change our feelings. And maybe this body of flesh is like an inability or an immature ability to taste the great banquet and enjoy the wine of the kingdom.

Two weeks ago I did another funeral. It was for a middle-aged woman who died of cancer. The night she died, I went to the house and spoke with the family. After we spoke, her nephew wanted to talk. I'll call him Jerry. He'd had a lot to drink, and he was wearing his heart on his sleeve. We sat outside in the dark; I had my arm around him as he fell apart sobbing.

He confessed to some sexual desires that he just couldn't change. He said, "Peter, my aunt really loved me, and now my aunt's dead. My mom says I'm going to Hell. Will I see my aunt again? Because I can't change."

My heart broke for him, and I said something like this:

Well, Jerry, Jesus said He makes all things new. And if you want to know if He makes you new, we can pray right here and now, and you can know. But if you're asking me if what you're doing is a sin, well, some Christians say it isn't a sin. Paul certainly appears to write: "no man doing that will inherit the kingdom."

But, Jerry, in the very same verse Paul writes that no adulterers and no greedy people will inherit the kingdom. Jerry, according to Jesus, I commit adultery in my heart all the time. And, Jerry, this is America. I don't even know anyone who is not greedy, who doesn't covet. I can't even imagine not coveting! It's my nature. So unless God changes my nature, my desires, and my heart, I'm not entering the kingdom.

Ephesians 1:10 says, "This is the plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Christ." Ephesians 5:5: "Be sure of this, everyone who is sexually immoral or impure or covetous...has no inheritance in the kingdom." It sounds like everyone is ultimately going to Heaven, but when they get there no one will have an old heart full of old desires.

Maybe there's something in desiring sameness, in men refusing women or women (the bride) refusing the groom, which is a deep rejection of diversity, which is the wine of the kingdom.

And maybe there's something in adultery that is a deep rejection of "covenant faithfulness," which is also wine of the kingdom.

And maybe there's something in greed that is the exact opposite of the relentless sacrificial love that is the very blood of Christ, the very wine of the kingdom.

So unless Christ gets His Bride to welcome His masculine presence, and unless Christ gets her to rejoice in covenant faithfulness, and unless Christ gets her to love as He has loved her, well then, for her, Heaven will feel like Hell. Unless God the Father gets His children to want His blessing, blessing them with all things won't do any good. He can't bless them with all things until He blesses them with a new heart.

You know, a spoiled child is a child who receives all things but can't enjoy anything because he has a greedy heart, an arrogant heart. He thinks he deserves the blessings, which means they aren't blessings, for grace is the substance of all blessings. Grace is the Father's heart.

A spoiled child desires his father's blessings more than the blessing that is his father. He desires his father's things more than he desires his father's heart, and so he must suffer the loss of all things in order to learn to love his father's heart. He must suffer the loss of *everything* in order to receive *anything* with a new heart.

St. Paul is in a Roman prison cell, having suffered the loss of all things, and he cannot contain himself as he tells the Ephesians of his Father's heart, Jesus. Jesus "from the bosom of the Father" is the Father's heart. Jesus is the *eulogia*, the blessing of the Father, the Word of the Father. In Romans, Paul writes, "He has given us his own son. Will he not also give us all things with him?" He's given us His heart. Will He not also give us all things with Him?

Of course you can't change your own heart.

Of course you can't change your own will. What would you will the change with?

Of course you can't change your own desires. What would you desire the change with?

Of course you can't! But God and His Word of blessing *can* and will.

Well, I didn't say all of that to Jerry, but I did say:

Jerry, you have a Father, and He adores you completely. His Word is Jesus. Ask Him to help, and He will help you. He'll lead you into all truth, and He'll give you a new heart, to inherit all things. I don't know how long it will take, at least a lifetime, maybe longer. But you can trust Jesus. He is your Father's blessing already given to you. And you didn't even have to sneeze.

(I didn't actually say the part about sneezing, but I should have.) We prayed. Jerry prayed, calling on Jesus, and Jesus did show up.

Now please don't get stuck on the details of judging sins, which is probably just more sin. I'm trying to say that maybe God really has—already has—"blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" and can now with His Word create in us a new heart so we can see it, receive it, and delight in it.

Clearly Paul is trying to describe a reality for which human words and phrases and sentence structures fail him, as if he'd been caught up to the third heaven.

I had an experience something like that about fifteen years ago in Canada. I've told you about it numerous times. It was on a day I decided that God didn't talk to me, didn't care for me. For me, He just wasn't there. That night I was literally pinned to the floor by the Spirit, and I saw that God was literally everywhere and every-when, blessing me. I literally could

not stop praising His glory. I saw that all creation, for all time, was speaking my Father's blessing. It had always been so. I just hadn't seen it.

The experience lasted for about an hour. When it was over, for about two weeks, I had the strangest sensation: I could not worry. I had no interest in my usual sins. I seemed to suffer from no blessing deprivation.

Gradually it wore off. But this is what I think God was saying: "Peter, this is your inheritance, and you will possess it." He's saying this to all of us. "You have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."

Now, you may say, "Great, that's nice. But what can I do about it?" Well, try to hate sin, because sin numbs you to the blessing. And come to worship and taste the blessing. But above all, don't think you can earn the blessing.

So what can you do?

Above all, maybe *nothing* is the best thing you can do. *Sabbath*. All sin, at its root, is an effort to seize the blessing...like pirates seize gold, like Adam and Eve took the fruit. So stop!

But how do I stop?

Remember how I told you that Jarek just couldn't keep still? His mom Janielle was white; her new boyfriend Andy was white; the skin of four-year-old Jarek was chocolate brown. And I think he felt it.

Well, Andy and Janielle decided to get married. I performed the wedding, and Jarek was the ring bearer. During the ceremony, Jarek walked down the aisle with the ring, but then he started looking for trouble. I bet his heart was telling him, "You got no daddy, and now this guy's taken your mommy." By the time we got to the vows, someone else was holding the ring and Jarek was quarantined between two relatives holding him down in the front row. Janielle said her vows; Andy said his vows. Jarek was squirming in his seat. I was starting the ring ceremony when suddenly Andy stopped me. And in front of everyone, he turned around, fixed his gaze on Jarek, and said, "Jarek!" And Jarek froze; everybody froze. Then Andy said:

Jarek, I love you with all my heart.
And I will always be your daddy.
And you will always be my son."

Jarek Conelly did not move the rest of the service. It was the power of the blessing.

I think the letter to the Ephesians is like that blessing. Certainly the communion table is the presence of that blessing. If you think, "Gosh, I wish I had Jarek's blessing," don't you see that you have *more* than Jarek's blessing?

I wrote back to Bob saying, "I'm sorry. My Dad just died." But at the funeral, I preached and mentioned Bob's request. I quoted Jesus saying, "My Father is your Father." I wasn't just talking about Dan Hiatt. Bob was there, and after the service he wrote me in tears saying, "Now I have it. I have the blessing."

At the end of the Austin Powers movie, it's the Gospel. Dr. Evil turns into Dr. Good when it's revealed that Austin's father is Dr. Evil's father, and he loves both of them. Austin then sings, "He ain't heavy, he's my brother."

Andy and Janielle moved to Texas and produced three little brothers and six little sisters for Jarek. Andy e-mailed me last Thursday and told me that Jarek is doing well and just started his first year at West Point Academy.

Now, I'm sure Jarek isn't perfect. I'm just saying that receiving the blessing *changes* you. And maybe God arranges all things (even blessing deprivation) so that at the right moment in the right place you would hear His blessing, receive His blessing, and bless Him in return.

No matter what, no kid was ever more legitimate than Jarek Conelly. Or you.

Communion

This is the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. This is the moment your Father forms the covenant. All eyes are on Him, except yours. You're being bad. You're restless, angry, and insecure...and causing trouble in the front row.

In Christ, God the Father takes the bread and breaks it saying, "This is my body, broken for you. Take it and eat it." He takes the cup saying, "This cup is the covenant in my blood. Take and drink."

All eyes are on Him, and then He says *your name*. You freeze. It's Judgment Day. He says your name and then, "Look! I love you with all my heart. You will *always* be my son or my daughter, and I will *always* be your Daddy."

So come eat the bread and taste the wine. Amen.

Disclaimer: The author has not edited this document. Therefore, there may be discrepancies. Some discrepancies may be minor; some may have to do with theology. When in doubt, please refer to the audio or video version of the sermon on this website and don't be shy about informing us of errors.