

What Gets You Excited? Ephesians 1:1-3

Have you ever experienced something *so exciting, so astounding, so unbelievable* that it just took your breath away? And when you finally caught your breath, you could hardly stop talking about what you saw or experienced? I *really* want you to think about that for a moment. If most of us think about it, we can recall some moment where we really got excited about something that we interpreted as positive or good. In fact, it is my contention that our capacity to do that sets us apart from all other creatures. My dog can get excited when I start to move to the basement where we store her food. And when she follows me down there some mornings and sees me pick out a can of Premium Beef and Rice—her tail wags so vigorously you could use it to buff the wax right off your car. Food really excites her.

But humans can respond not only to things that stimulate our senses—like food. We have the capacity to interpret events and assign meaning to them that can produce intense emotional excitement. No dog or cat will respond emotionally when they see a statue of a dictator being toppled or a football flying through the goalposts to break a tie as the final second ticks off a scoreboard—but people do. No bird can read a document that proclaims the freedom of a people from tyranny and dance in the streets for joy—but people can. No other creature—be it plant or animal receives a communication about a loved one who has met with an untimely end and suddenly experience a deep sense of sorrow and grief. But humans often do. Why? Because that is in part what you and I were made to do. We were made to respond to news. Good news *and* bad news. Not like mere machines processing data—but as human beings with emotions that can be deeply moved by what we see and by how we interpret what is going on around us.

For those of you out there who think that the ideal man or woman is some emotionless character like **Mr. Spock** on **Star Trek**, I would encourage you to look at the life of Jesus and carefully study his emotions. As the ideal human being, He was far from emotionless. In fact, if you carefully look at the Gospels, you will find that He displays a wide range of emotions—and he does so often with great intensity. He gets extremely, though righteously angry when the moneychangers misuse the Temple. He bursts into tears at Lazarus' funeral—even though he knows that he is about to raise his dear friend from the dead. He loves the rich young ruler—and is very sad when this man walks away loaded with money—but spiritually bankrupt. More than once he is exasperated with his disciples' spiritual dullness—even as he is amazed at the faith of a Gentile woman who begs for his help like a dog who scrounges for crumbs under a table. The night before his crucifixion, he is so emotionally distressed that his sweat appears like drops of blood. Yet—it is for the joy that is set before him that He moves so steadily toward His appointment at Golgotha. Jesus, the perfect God-man was a passionate human being in his life here on earth. But He is not alone in expressing emotion.

As we look at Ephesians 1:3 in our text, it immediately becomes obvious that the Apostle Paul, the writer of this letter, is deeply moved by what he is writing to his readers. His

heart has been totally captured by this message from the Lord. It is obvious that he could not hide his emotions even if he wanted to. Just listen to his opening words: ***“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.”***

Can you feel the emotion of his words here? He uses the word blessing over and over. It’s as if he is saying—*“Do you see how **blessed** we are?”* But notice something else. In this section (which is actually one uninterrupted sentence from verse three through verse 14)—in this section and in other places in the book, Paul frequently launches into sentences that are so long that if he was dictating this particular letter—as he was known to do on occasions—his transcriber was likely suffering from acute carpal tunnel syndrome by the time he finished writing down the words of this book! Why? Paul is *totally caught up* in what he is discussing. (Pause) If we are going to allow this book do what it did for Paul and what he prayed that it would do for his first century audience—we need to do as Paul did—that God would open our eyes to the message of this book. **[Pray].**

The question is not whether or not it is spiritual for a believer to have or show emotion. The question is—*what moves you?!*

A game winning basket? A figure skater doing a triple axel? A big income tax refund? A new sports car? A big promotion? Being valedictorian of your class? A green yard with no weeds or bare spots? (Then what are you doing in Michigan?!) A child that grows up to be a success? Those things are well and good. But if any of those things have become the keys that wind the inner coil of your life and drive you to do what you do—you need to grasp what this passage is saying. What is it in this text that so moves Paul? What is in this text that can just as powerfully move you and me today? There are two simple but powerful truths. God is blessed—and God has blessed us. First notice that ...

I. God is blessed.

In an effort to avoid possible confusion, the NIV makes a slight change here in the rendering of this text. *“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.”* In the original text, it literally reads: *Blessed [is] the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”* Did you catch the slight difference? The NIV translators are saying that when we think of all that God has done for us, we should lift up our hearts and lips in praise to God. I don’t disagree with that idea. In fact, I think the whole paragraph supports that idea. I just don’t think that is the point in the very first part of verse 1. It is not so much starting off with the idea that God has blessed us so we ought to bless or praise Him. It is saying even more than that. That God himself is already blessed. As Peter O’Brien points out: This is not a wish. It’s a fact!

Now don’t think I am just trying to split hairs here. Think a little more deeply with me for a moment. We have been taught to bless people who bless us. That is

to express appreciation for the good things that others do to or for us. “*Don’t forget to write Uncle Bill for your Christmas gift.*” And so we write a thank you note and bless others for their blessings to us. But Paul is saying that God is in a perpetual state of blessing. His being blessed is not dependent on anything we can say or do in return for His blessings. God is blessed because it is the very character and nature of God to be so. God is blessed because of Who He is. Do you know what that means? It means God never has a bad day. It means that God is totally and eternally satisfied. It means that God’s blessings to others have nothing to do with what others do to or for Him. It means that God is free to bless us simply because of His infinite mercy and grace.

Too many times we think of God’s blessing in conditional terms. We joke about the fact that when something fortuitous happens to us—like a major, career-making proposal goes through at work—and people will say—“You must have been living right.” Or let’s say you have the opportunity to be used by God to lead someone to Christ. You could be tempted to think it was because you had your devotions that morning.

Brothers and sisters—God blesses because that is the nature of Who He is. He is a God who blesses not in order to garner the blessings of others—but because He himself is *already* blessed. Do you get Paul’s point here? And that means that no matter what is happening on a given day in the world—God will continue to work out His blessings because He is an unending fountain of blessing. Paul is overwhelmed with that truth. So should you and I.

Trans. But that is not all. The God who Himself is blessed, blesses us.

II. God blesses us.

Question: Who is the “us” that Paul refers to in verse 3? It is the same people He has just spoken of in verse 2. *To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.* We talked about the meaning of the word saints, last week. It is not so much an indicator of extraordinary character—like we might say—So-and-so is a real “saint.” It simply identifies a person as *someone who belongs to God.* Paul goes on to further identify the “us” of verse 3 as the “faithful in Christ Jesus.” The word faithful can mean trustworthy or dependable. But the primary meaning is the word, “believers. If you think about it—those two senses are two sides of the same coin. True belief or saving faith in Jesus Christ will make a person trustworthy. And trustworthiness is an indication that a person has true belief or genuine faith.

Application: No faithfulness—no faith? That is the entire argument of the book of James. The point here is that God’s blessing is specifically and ultimately directed to believers. Are you one of the “us” crowd in verse 3? Check out the requirements in verse 2. Are you a believer in Christ? Has that belief demonstrated itself in a lifestyle that could be characterized as faithful?

Trans. But exactly what are these blessings? And where are they to be found? Paul uses three key phrases to unpack God’s blessings to and for us...

A. In the heavenly realms.

This phrase is very unique. In fact, while you will find it here and in four other verses in Ephesians, you won’t find it anywhere else in the NT. So what is it talking about? When you first look at the phrase, it seems to indicate a *locality* or place.

Ephesians 1:20

“...which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand *in the heavenly realms...*”

This use seems pretty obvious. The heavenly places are *where Christ is*.

Ephesians 2:6

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

This verse starts to get bit confusing. We can conceive of Christ in heaven—but in what sense are Christians there? And notice he is not talking about those who have departed this life. He is talking about believers *in* this life. But if that sounds a bit confusing, just look at the next two verses in Ephesians where this phrase is used!

Ephesians 3:10

“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...*” That too sounds like heaven—except that the rulers and authorities here are not limited to good angels. Now look at the last occurrence.

Ephesians 6:12

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*.

That’s a bit scary? What are the evil angels, otherwise known as demons doing in the *heavenly realm*?

And as you study this phrase even further, you begin to realize that Paul is not speaking so much in terms of a place as much as an ongoing spiritual reality. Heavenly places is a figure of speech that Paul uses to describe your everyday spiritual life. And what you are going to learn in Ephesians

is that spiritual reality is far more than what you can see with your physical eyes. It is the stuff of life that goes on in your mind. And while it involves spiritual warfare, it also involves the blessing of God and the power to successfully wage war over sin. We will see that especially when we look at the armor of God in chapter 6.

Trans. But notice the next phrase....

B. With every spiritual blessing.

This phrase is rich. This is what makes every believer a spiritual millionaire. This is all the stuff that God has lavished on us in terms of our salvation. What are these blessings? They are blessings that are ministered to us by God's Spirit. So we have the Father who is the source of all our blessings. And we have His Spirit who takes what God has done and helps us to understand and appropriate what the Father has done for us. If God has given us the treasure—it's the Spirit who unlocks the chest and blesses us in ways that move us like Paul was moved. Starting next week, we are going look at these blessings as we begin to work our way through verses 4-14. But there is one more description of God's blessing. Paul says that God has blessed us....

C. In Christ.

I cannot think of a more significant phrase in all the book of Ephesians—or the Bible for that matter. You and I will undoubtedly struggle to get our arms around all that this book has to tell us about God's blessing. But if you can only walk away with one phrase—this is one you really want to ask God to help you get a grip on. Just in the first fourteen verses alone, the phrase in Christ or in Him occurs 11 times. Altogether Paul uses it some 35 times in his epistles. So what does it mean? To be in Christ is to be united with Him. Still a bit fuzzy. Let me explain further.

Mankind was originally created in God's image. As we learned in Genesis, we were placed here in Adam to be God's vice-regents. Just like ancient rulers placed statues of themselves throughout their realms, God placed man on earth to reflect His rule and reign over the earth. That was our mission—to visibly reflect the invisible God before the rest of Creation. Everything of course was created to display the attributes of God. But Adam and his offspring were His unique workmanship. Oak trees glorify God by pointing to their creator. But man could glorify God by acting *like* his creator! Until something happened. When mankind in Adam chose to follow a rival authority and rebelled against the Word of God, he ripped the face of God off of himself and became a reflector of himself!

Amazingly and almost immediately, God intervened with a promise. He starts to repair the damage when he calls a man named Abraham. From Abraham, God calls a new people whose purpose once again is display God before the world. The whole nation of Israel was to be a priest that represented God before the rest of the world. But as you know—they ultimately failed in that task. Yet God's promises did not falter.

For God's redemptive promises were finally fulfilled in Christ. In effect He said, I will come back. I will make you God's people once again. I will redeem you and reconcile you to the Father.

And then He came. And while on the earth, He did what the first Adam and all mankind had failed to do. When tempted in the wilderness, he chose to work within God's promises. He rejected the lies of Satan and obeyed the Father perfectly.

On one occasion, He stood in front of the Temple in Jerusalem and said in so many words—the things that this Temple is supposed to do—I AM. I Am the Presence of God before you. I am the sacrifice which is the only way to God.

Later in His ministry, He transfigured, He glowed in the presence of the Father, revealing His true glory. He could have stopped then and there—but He desired for *all* His people to glow in the presence of God. So He died for our sins—and rose again.

When He died, arose, and went back to heaven—He did something astounding. Through the Holy Spirit, He created a new people—the Church. We have become the replacement for the Temple. We are the image that God has left behind to mirror His glory. Why? Because we are *in Him!*

