

“Gathered and Blessed”

Jeremiah 31:10-14; Ephesians 1:3-10

December 31, 2023

Today, I want to start our journey through Ephesians 1:3-10 with a story that captures the essence of being chosen and blessed by God. It's about a young man from our community named Adam. Adam's life began with a significant challenge; he was born prematurely and spent his first months in the neonatal ICU. This early arrival into the world left a lasting mark – Adam was almost completely blind. But here's where the story takes an uplifting turn, revealing the spiritual blessings Adam received, being chosen by God in Christ. Despite his visual impairment, Adam developed a passion for basketball. You might think that basketball and blindness don't mix, but Adam didn't see it that way. His condition wasn't a barrier; it was an arena for God's grace to manifest. Day after day, Adam would be out in his backyard, practicing shots on the basketball hoop. His determination was relentless, his spirit unbreakable. Slowly, his skill grew until he became an exceptional player, arguably better than many who played with full sight. Adam's ambition soared higher when he decided to participate in a Three-on-Three basketball tournament. He enlisted two friends, and together, they stepped into the challenge. Their first game was tough – they struggled and were defeated. But they didn't give up. The following games witnessed something extraordinary. Adam's friends, in a beautiful display of teamwork, found ways to pass him the ball in positions where he could score. And score he did. Adam racked up an incredible 32 points in a single game! This isn't just a story about overcoming physical limitations; it's a testament to the spiritual blessings Adam received as one chosen by God. His determination, skill, and the unity with his friends were reflections of the spiritual wealth bestowed upon him. Adam's story is a vivid illustration of how God equips and empowers those He has chosen. Despite what the world saw as a disadvantage, Adam's life became a canvas for God's grace, painting a picture of hope, perseverance, and triumph.

As we marvel at Adam's story, we are reminded of our own spiritual journey. Just as Adam was equipped to overcome and excel, we too are blessed with spiritual riches by a God who chose us even before the world was made. Ephesians 1:4 tells us that we are chosen to be holy and blameless in His sight. This isn't about physical abilities or worldly achievements; it's about the spiritual blessings that flow from being chosen in Christ. Adam's story uplifts us, not just because of his remarkable achievements in basketball, but because it points us to the deeper reality of God's work in our lives. As we begin to explore the first section of our sermon, **Chosen for a Purpose - Understanding Our Place in God's Plan**, let Adam's story inspire us. Let it remind us that being chosen by God is not about perfection in the world's eyes, but about the unique ways God blesses and uses us for His glory.

As we delve into Ephesians 1:4, it's crucial to grasp the historical and theological backdrop of this letter. Paul, the apostle, is writing to the church in Ephesus, a diverse community that was a melting pot of cultures, religious practices, and social norms. This was a society where social and religious divisions were not just common, but deeply ingrained. The Jewish and Gentile divide, in particular, was significant. Jews lived under the Law, a comprehensive system governing every aspect of life and identity, while Gentiles were often seen as outsiders to God's promises. Into this divided world, Paul's message in Ephesians comes as a unifying proclamation. He writes, *"For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight."* This declaration would have been revolutionary. To be chosen by God was, in Jewish thought, a privilege reserved for Israel, God's chosen people. But Paul expands this idea dramatically. The 'us' in Ephesians includes both Jews and Gentiles. This is more than inclusion; it's a radical redefinition of God's family. It's a message that says, regardless of your background, ethnicity, or past, in Christ, you are chosen by God.

Now, let's look closely at the original Greek words used in this verse. The term for 'chosen' is ἐκλέγομαι (eklegomai), which means to pick out, choose, or select for oneself. This isn't a random choice; it's deliberate and purposeful. God is not making an arbitrary decision but is purposefully selecting individuals for a specific role in His grand design. The words 'holy' and 'blameless' are also significant. 'Holy' translates to ἅγιος (hagios), which means set apart, sacred, or consecrated. To be holy is to be distinct from the common or unclean; it's a status conferred upon us by God, not

something we earn. 'Blameless,' or ἄμωμος (amōmos), conveys the idea of being without blemish, faultless. It's a term often used in the context of sacrificial offerings, which needed to be without defect. In the context of Ephesians, being 'holy and blameless' speaks to our identity and standing before God in Christ. It's not about moral perfection achieved through human effort; it's about a new identity given to us by God. We are set apart, not because of our inherent goodness or religious achievements, but because God has chosen us in Christ and sees us as holy and blameless through Him.

The implications of these words for the Ephesians, and for us, are profound. In a world marked by division and striving for religious or social status, Paul's message is clear: in Christ, you are chosen, set apart, and seen as faultless by God Himself. This isn't just a new status; it's a whole new way of seeing ourselves and each other. It breaks down barriers, redefines relationships, and reshapes communities. As we reflect on this, let's consider how this understanding of being chosen and set apart by God can transform our perception of ourselves and our interactions with others, particularly in a world that is still deeply divided in so many ways.

In our journey through Ephesians, we find ourselves at a crucial intersection between ancient wisdom and modern challenges. As we dwell on Ephesians 1:3, where Paul blesses God for bestowing *'every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ,'* we must ponder how this profound statement echoes in the corridors of our digital era. This era, marked by rapid technological advancements, presents unique challenges to our spiritual life and calls for a deeper understanding of what truly constitutes our blessings.

Paul's words in Ephesians 1:3 challenge the core of the digital age's material focus. He points us towards blessings that transcend our physical realm. These are not blessings one can 'like' on social media or download from an app store; they are the deeper, life-giving gifts bestowed upon us in Christ. To unpack this, let's turn to the wisdom of the early church fathers. St. John Chrysostom, in his homilies on Ephesians, emphasized that these spiritual blessings are far superior to earthly ones, as they lead us to eternal life and union with Christ. He wrote, *'He hath blessed us with all spiritual blessing; that is, He hath made us worthy of all spiritual blessing, of righteousness, of sanctification, of redemption, of adoption as sons.'* Chrysostom's insight guides us in understanding the richness of what we have in Christ, contrasting sharply with the fleeting pleasures and distractions offered by the digital world.

In today's context, where screen time often replaces quiet time, and virtual interactions overshadow face-to-face fellowship, we must be vigilant. The digital age, while bringing many conveniences and opportunities for connecting and learning, also brings a risk of spiritual superficiality. As theologian and author C.S. Lewis warned in *'The Screwtape Letters,'* our enemy delights when we are 'distracted from eternal realities,' lost in the trivialities and constant noise of the world. To navigate these treacherous waters, we need to anchor ourselves in Scripture. Consider David's proclamation in Psalm 119:37, *'Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to Your Word.'* David's plea is deeply relevant today. In a world where our eyes are constantly bombarded with digital stimuli, we need to seek refuge in God's Word, allowing it to guide and preserve us.

As we think about practical applications, let's consider Paul's exhortation in Romans 12:2, *'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.'* This transformation is crucial in how we engage with the digital world. It calls us to be intentional in our digital consumption, ensuring that it aligns with our spiritual values and aids our growth in Christ.

I challenge you to examine how your digital habits are impacting your spiritual life. Are they drawing you closer to God, or are they becoming a barrier? Let's commit to using digital platforms as tools for spiritual growth – for instance, by subscribing to daily devotional emails, listening to Christian podcasts, or joining online Bible study groups. In conclusion, as we navigate the complexities and temptations of the digital age, let's heed the wisdom of theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who reminded us in *'Life Together'* that 'the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him.' Whether through digital means or in-person fellowship, let's seek out and prioritize these spiritual interactions.

Let us then step forward, balancing the benefits of the digital age with a firm grounding in our

spiritual identity in Christ. As we do so, let's remember that our truest and most enduring blessings are those spiritual gifts bestowed upon us in Christ – gifts of grace, love, peace, and eternal hope. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.