

God's Wonderful Plan



SABBATH—JULY 1

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Ephesians 1:3, 20; Ephesians 1:7, 8; Colossians 1:13, 14; Titus 2:13, 14; Hebrews 9:15; Ephesians 1:9, 10; Ephesians 1:11, 12; Ephesians 1:13, 14.

MEMORY VERSE: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ, God has given us every spiritual blessing in heaven" (Ephesians 1:3, ERV).

ON JULY 21, 1969, ASTRONAUT NEIL ARMSTRONG was the first person to walk on the moon. 25 years later, Armstrong wrote a thank-you note to the team who made the spacesuit he wore when he walked on the moon. Armstrong thanked the team at the Johnson Space Center for the suit that kept him alive during his moon walk.

Paul starts his letter to the Ephesians with a big thank-you note. In this note, Paul praises God for His many blessings. These blessings are necessary to the lives of Christians in the same way that a spacesuit is necessary for an astronaut who walks on the moon. Paul tells us that God has worked hard to give us His promised blessings for a long time (Ephesians 1:4). God has worked hard to keep His promises to us since He first made the skies and the earth. Paul praises God for working so hard to help His children all this time.

Paul's opening to the letter of Ephesians shows us how to worship and praise God for the many blessings He gives us.



Paul starts his letter to the Ephesians with a big thank-you note.

GOD ACCEPTS US BECAUSE OF JESUS (Ephesians 1:3, 20)

A thank-you note often includes the name of the gift or gifts that someone gives you. Paul includes a long gift list in Ephesians 1:3–14. Paul thanks God for the blessings that the Good News about Jesus gives us.

Paul praises God because He “has given us every spiritual blessing in heaven” (Ephesians 1:3, ERV). The word “spiritual” comes from the Greek word “**pneumatikos**,” which shows us that our blessings come from the Holy Spirit. The word “Spirit” is “**pneuma**” in the Greek language. This word helps us remember the ending of Paul’s gift list. At the end of his gift list, Paul celebrates the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives (Ephesians 1:13, 14).

Ephesians 1:3–6 talks about how God views us because of everything Jesus did for us. Before Jesus made the earth, God chose us because of Jesus. God “chose us to be holy and without blame in his eyes” (Ephesians 1:4, NlrV). We are God’s sons and daughters because God made us and because Jesus saves us (Ephesians 1:5). “We have been accepted by God through [because of] Jesus Christ, whom [who is the One] he loves so much” (Ephesians 1:6, WE). In short, God wants us to be saved. We lose God’s saving gift when we choose to sin.

Paul tells us that “God has given us every spiritual blessing in heaven” (Ephesians 1:3, ERV). What do the words “in heaven” mean? Read Ephesians 1:3, 20; Ephesians 2:6; Ephesians 3:10; and Ephesians 6:12 for the answer. Compare “in heaven” to “all the heavens [the place above the stars],” which we read about in Ephesians 4:10, NlrV. How are the two wordings different?

In Ephesians, the words “in heaven” or “all the heavens” mean the place where God lives (Ephesians 1:3; Ephesians 4:10, NlrV). “In heaven” and “all the heavens” also mean the place where the spiritual powers live (Ephesians 1:10, 20, 21; Ephesians 3:10, 15; Ephesians 6:12) and the place where Jesus sits next to God on His right side (Ephesians 1:20). God offers Christians blessings from heaven because of Jesus (Ephesians 1:3; Ephesians 2:6). At the same time, evil powers fight against Jesus our Lord and the work He does for us in heaven (Ephesians 3:10; Ephesians 6:12).

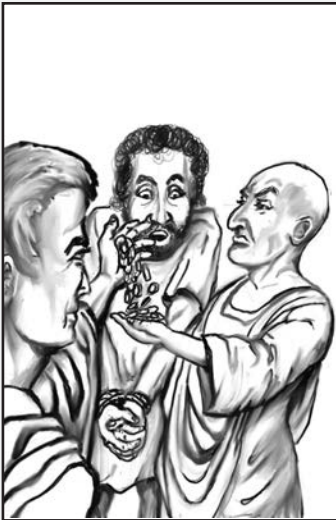
God chose us because of Jesus (Ephesians 1:4). What is God’s plan for us?



We are God’s sons and daughters because God made us and because Jesus saves us (Ephesians 1:5).

THE COST OF FORGIVENESS (Ephesians 1:7, 8)

In the past, sin controlled the lives of Paul’s readers. That’s why Paul said his readers were the same as dead people: “In the past your spiritual lives were dead because of your sins and the things you did wrong against God” (Ephesians 2:1, ICB). They were “dead” because they were doing the things Satan commanded them to do (Ephesians 2:1–3). They were slaves to sin and Satan. They were too weak to run away from him. They needed someone to save them. God sent Jesus to save them. Paul celebrates two blessings that God’s mercy gives us: forgiveness and being saved.



“*Apolutrōsis*” meant to buy a slave’s freedom or to pay someone money to free a slave.

“**Because of the blood of Christ, we are bought and made free from the punishment of sin**” (Ephesians 1:7, NLV). What does it mean that we are “bought and made free”? Paul talks about this same idea in Colossians 1:13, 14; Titus 2:13, 14; and Hebrews 9:15. How do these verses talk about the same thing that we read about in Ephesians 1:7, 8?

The words written as “made free” (Ephesians 1:7) come from the Greek word “*apolutrōsis*.” “**Apolutrōsis**” meant to buy a slave’s freedom or to pay someone money to free a slave. Slaves cost a lot of money. So, when Paul talks about how God frees us from sin, he wants us to understand that God paid a high price to make us free.

How much did our freedom from sin cost God? As we just read, “Because of the blood of Christ, we are bought and made free from the punishment of sin” (Ephesians 1:7, NLV). For sure, God paid a high price to free us from sin. Because of Jesus, we are no longer sin’s slaves!

“When God saves us from sin, He shows us what He thinks of us. He thinks we are people, not things. When God bought our freedom, He made us citizens of heaven. We are no longer slaves on earth.”—Alister E. McGrath, *What Was God Doing on the Cross?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), page 78, adapted.

Jesus’ death on the cross gave us many blessings. Jesus gave us the gift of forgiveness (Ephesians 1:7). He accepted the price of our sin, both from the past and in the future (Colossians 2:14). God became our Father, who gives us His loving favor and mercy (Ephesians 1:7, 8).

GOD'S WONDERFUL PLAN (Ephesians 1:9, 10)

What is God's plan for all time? How big is this plan? Read Ephesians 1:9, 10 for the answers.

What is God's final plan? He wants to join everything, everywhere, in Jesus.

Paul's uses a Greek word to show this idea. The Greek word is "**anakephalaiōsasthai.**" This fancy big word means to "add up" all things. In New Testament times, when accountants added up a column of numbers, they put the total at the top of the column. In the same way, Jesus is at the top of God's final plan. God made this plan before He made the earth and the sky (Ephesians 1:4). God's plan is forever. So, we can see that God's plan is very big.

God's whole plan to save us is about Jesus and His death on the cross, His waking up from the dead, His going to heaven, and His being honored in front of the angels (Ephesians 1:15–2:10). God's plan also included starting the church on earth. The church will help to join humans together, both Jews and non-Jews (Ephesians 2:11–3:13).

In this way, the church shows Satan and his followers that God's plan is working and that Satan's kingdom will end (Ephesians 3:10). The Bible tells us that Satan's end is coming: "The devil has come down to you. He is very angry. He knows his time is short" (Revelation 12:12, NIV).

The last half of Paul's letter starts with an announcement for peace and agreement in the church (Ephesians 4:1–16). Then Paul tells the church to avoid behavior that destroys agreement. Paul tells church members to work together with peace (Ephesians 4:17–6:9). Paul ends his letter with a powerful word picture. He compares the church to a strong army. This "army" works together to make peace on earth in Jesus' name (Ephesians 6:10–20).

How can you celebrate the saving mercy and forgiveness that Jesus gives you? How do you feel when you remember that God's mercy and forgiveness are part of God's big plan? His mercy and forgiveness are part of His plan to save humans from sin and join together all things in peace and agreement in Jesus.



In New Testament times, when accountants added up a column of numbers, they put the total at the top of the column.

PRAISING GOD IN ALL HIS GLORY (Ephesians 1:11, 12)

“In Christ [Jesus] we were chosen to be God’s people. God had already chosen us to be his people, because that is what he wanted. And God is the One who makes everything agree with what he decides and wants. We are the first people who hoped in Christ. And we were chosen so that we would bring praise to God’s glory” (Ephesians 1:11, 12, ICB).

The Christians in Ephesus don’t understand who they are anymore. So, they feel hopeless (Ephesians 3:13). Paul wants to help the Ephesians understand who they are as Christians. Christians are God’s children (Ephesians 1:5). They have many blessings because of Jesus. God’s plan is being worked out in their lives (Ephesians 1:11). God also has a bigger plan to join together everything and everyone in Jesus (Ephesians 1:10). So, the Ephesians can trust that God forgives them and accepts them. They can trust in His blessings, too. They can announce the message in Ephesians 1:3–14 with trust and joy. What is this message? We should praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!



Paul wants the Christians in Ephesus to know how much they are worth to God.

Paul says that “we will get what God promised for his people” (Ephesians 1:14, ICB; also, read Ephesians 1:11, 18). Why do you think this idea is important to Paul?

Did a family member leave you a gift that you got after he or she died? Maybe a family member left you a special treasure or a lot of money. In Paul’s view, Christians got a gift when Jesus died. God gave them this gift (Ephesians 1:14). When Christians get this gift from God, they become a gift to God (Ephesians 1:17, 18).

In the Old Testament, God’s people are sometimes thought of as being His treasure or His “share” (Zechariah 2:12, NLV; also, read Deuteronomy 9:29 and Deuteronomy 32:9). So, we become God’s own treasure, as we see from Ephesians 1:18 and Ephesians 1:11. That’s why we can write Ephesians 1:11 this way: “Because of Jesus we belong to God.” Paul wants the Christians in Ephesus to know how much they are worth to God. The Ephesian Christians don’t only get a special treasure from God (Ephesians 1:14; Ephesians 3:6; compare Ephesians 5:5). They are God’s treasure.

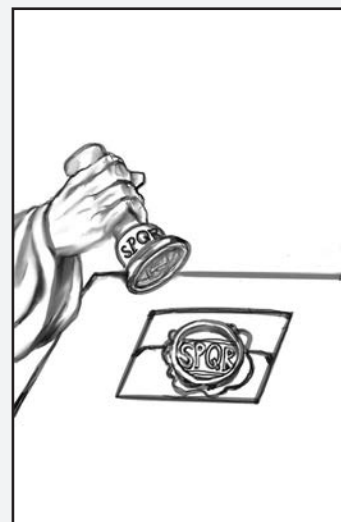
WHAT THE HOLY SPIRIT DOES FOR US (Ephesians 1:13, 14)

In Ephesians 1:13, 14, Paul explains how his readers' lives changed after they accepted Jesus. How does the change in their lives happen?

Paul uses two word pictures to show that the Holy Spirit is important to the lives of Christians. The first word picture is a mark. A mark is something that someone put on a contract in Bible times to show who he was. Marks were the same as signatures. The Holy Spirit is the same as a special mark that God puts on the lives of His people after they accept Jesus. In Bible times, people used special marks for many reasons. People put marks on copies of laws and agreements to show other people that they could trust these copies. Marks were put on containers to show how much was in the container or to show that what was inside the container was excellent (read Ezekiel 28:12, EXB). Sometimes people put marks on sales contracts to show that they saw the sale happen (read Jeremiah 32:10–14, 44). Marks were also put on contracts and letters (read 1 Kings 21:8) and contracts about adoptions. A mark also announced who was the owner of the contract or agreement. A mark was a promise, too. A mark showed the things the owner promised to protect. The Holy Spirit works in our lives the same as a mark. When we have the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we show that we belong to God and that God will protect us (compare Ephesians 4:30). So, now you know what the Bible means when it says, “God put his special mark on you by giving you the Holy Spirit that he promised” (Ephesians 1:13, ERV).

“Paul says that when you accept Jesus and believe in Him, the Holy Spirit marks you. The verb ‘marks’ comes from the Greek verb: **‘sphragizō.’** The Holy Spirit marks you as someone that God saved. Your mark also means that on the day that Jesus comes back He will take you home. This Bible truth is so wonderful! The Holy Spirit marks Jesus’ followers with the mark of God’s saving mercy when they first believe.”— Jiří Moskala, “Misinterpreted End-Time Issues: Five Myths in Adventism,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, volume 28, number 1 (2017), page 95, adapted.

The second word picture that Paul uses for the Holy Spirit is “a promise” (Ephesians 1:14, NLV). The Holy Spirit is God’s promise to us that we will get everything He promised to give us in full (compare 2 Corinthians 1:22; 2 Corinthians 5:5).



People put marks on copies of laws and agreements to show other people that they could trust these copies.



God is a loving Father who cares about us (read Ephesians 3:15).

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Does Ephesians 1:3–14 teach us that God decides the future of humans before they are born? Does God decide who will get everlasting life and who will get everlasting death before they are born? Sad to say, many people believe this false idea.

Let's look at what Paul is really saying:

1. In Ephesians 1:3–14, Jesus makes the choice to adopt us (Ephesians 1:5). So, we are adopted because of Him (Ephesians 1:4, 11). This idea suggests that God decides to save us because we choose to believe in Jesus. So, God doesn't pick who will be saved or lost before people are born. When we have faith in Jesus, God accepts us.
2. Ephesians 1:3–14 also talks about God's saving work in our lives. God is our Father. We are His adopted children (Ephesians 1:3–5). God blesses us fully and freely (Ephesians 1:8). These words help us understand better God's choice to save us. God is not a Judge who has no heart. God is a loving Father who cares about us (read Ephesians 3:15).
3. Ephesians 1:3–14 also teaches us that God honors human choice. (Read, also, Ephesians 2:8; Ephesians 3:17; and Ephesians 4:1–6:20. These verses talk about our free choice and how we answer God in faith. Also, read 1 Timothy 2:4 and Acts 17:22–31 for more information on this topic.) As Ellen G. White said, "God gave His mercy to everyone on earth when He gave His Son to the human family. Men and women who choose to accept this gift will live in Christ Jesus. They will become who God wants them to be."
—*Steps to Christ*, page 68, adapted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 God doesn't pick and choose who will be saved or lost before we are born. What Bible verses can you use to explain this idea?
- 2 Who decides if a person is saved in Jesus?
- 3 "Because of the blood of Christ [Jesus], we are bought and made free from the punishment of sin. And because of His blood, our sins are forgiven. His loving-favor to us is so rich" (Ephesians 1:7, NLV). How does this verse show us that we are saved only by God's mercy because of our faith, and not by our good behavior?

AMAZING PATH TO LEBANON

Ruan Oliveira was from Brazil. He served as a volunteer teacher at the Adventist Learning Center in Beirut, Lebanon. Ruan was part of a group of teachers who taught Syrian children in grades 1–8. These children came to Lebanon with their families to escape the war in Syria.

While Ruan was in Beirut, he went to an “I Will Go!” training class at Middle East University. The man teaching the class was Brian Manley. Ruan had a difficult time listening because he kept wondering, “Where have I seen this guy before?”

Brian Manley talked about how Paul made tents in non-Christian countries. Mr. Manley told about “modern Pauls” who used their skills to work in non-Christian countries today. While Mr. Manley talked, Ruan pulled out his cellphone and started to search through the pictures on his phone.

Ruan grew up in a family that served God. During high school, Ruan went with his parents to Argentina for an “I Will Go!” meeting, in 2017. The meeting touched Ruan’s heart. There, Ruan learned about the needs of people in the Middle East.

During Ruan’s first year at the university, he accepted an invitation to teach English in a non-Christian country in Asia. Soon after Ruan arrived in the country, the language school closed. Ruan stayed to study the local language. But Ruan was not allowed to talk about God to anyone. Some months later, Ruan went back to Brazil for his second year at the university. Then Ruan felt a strong wish to go overseas again. Ruan signed up online at VividFaith.com to be a teacher in the Middle East. VividFaith.com is the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s website for volunteers. Ruan wanted to serve in the Middle East since he learned about the needs of the people at the 2017 meetings in Argentina.

Ruan prayed, “God, the decision is Yours. I will accept the first job I get.” Seven minutes later, a message popped up on his phone. The message was a job offer from the Adventist Learning Center in Beirut. Ruan arrived at the school six weeks later. After Asia, Ruan was happy about the religious freedom in Lebanon. He said, “I can tell everyone here I am a Christian!”

When Brian Manley finished the meeting, Ruan said, “I know where I’ve seen you before!” Then Ruan showed Brian pictures on his phone. One of the photos showed Ruan’s parents with Brian at the 2017 meetings. At those meetings, Brian Manley’s talk about Paul and making tents touched Ruan’s heart. That’s when Ruan first wanted to serve God in the Middle East.

After a year in Lebanon, Ruan wants to finish college and become a full-time Bible worker overseas. He believes this work is God’s plan for his life. When Ruan saw Brian Manley again, he knew that God was showing him this special plan.

INSIDE
Story
by KATHIE LICHTENWALTER



Ruan said, “I know where I’ve seen you before!”

