

INEXHAUSTIBLE GRACE

(Ephesians 1.3-10)

Introduction

Some years ago, I was given this 1,000 piece puzzle for Christmas. I'm embarrassed to say that it took me about a decade to get round to doing it. I am just not patient enough to do jigsaws of this size.

By the way, be careful about praying for more patience. God will answer your prayer with a traffic jam the next day when you're late or a cancelled train when you're in a hurry.

If you were to open this box, what would you see? It's not a trick question. You would see a bewildering pile of different coloured pieces.

How would you go about putting it all together? Here's my method: First, I sort the straight edged pieces from the rest. Then I place the corners in position. Then, using the picture on the box as a guide, I piece together the outline. Then, I look for recognisable features and work outwards from there. Is that how you do jigsaws?

Counting the astoundingly numerous and varied blessings of God is like opening the lid of a giant jigsaw puzzle.

Ephesians 1, if you like, is the picture on the box. This is the plan, the big picture. Ephesians 1 is the Bible's grandstand view of who God is, who we are, and why we are here, in all its wide-angle majesty. It's here we see how it all fits together.

We spend most of our lives zooming in on the details of the ups and downs of life, the pieces of the puzzle if you like, that we lose sight of the big picture.

Ascension is about the big picture; past present, and future. Jesus is not down here, putting quibbling Pharisees in their place; he's up high on his

throne, surveying the whole thing, reigning in glory and holding all creation together. Inexhaustible grace.

1) Present (v7-8)

Ephesians 1, from our perspective, is about who Christians really are, how we got here, and what's in store for us.

There were men who retired in a certain town. Every day they would meet up for a chat and sit on a particular park bench. Ten years passed, then twenty.

One day one said to the other, "My memory isn't what it used to be. Can you remind me of your name?" There was silence. So he repeated the question. Again there was a long silence. Finally, the other bloke turned to his friend and said, "When do you need to know by?"

As Christians we need to know who we really are and Ephesians 1 spells it all out.

In v7-8, it talks about our present and says, "we have [now] redemption through his blood and the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us." Let's tease that out.

Redemption means freedom from being a prisoner, a hostage or a slave. You might think, "What has that got to do with me?" I'll tell you. The truth is that every wrong thing we do or think, has an addictive power that can end up controlling us. Jesus said, "Everyone who sins is a slave of sin."

When people smoke tobacco, or take drugs, or bet on the horses it can become addictive.

But actually all sin is addictive. It's equally true, for example, when I throw a temper or indulge in a gossip. If I don't cut those things at the root they can all get a grip on my life and become habitual, then compulsive. They have a holding power, making me a slave to them.

Paul was brought up on one of the roughest estates in Manchester. His father was an alcoholic. He left school at fifteen, ran away from home, lived on the streets, joined a gang, got involved in crime and ended up in prison. When he came out he joined the army. He went through two divorces.

In 1994, he walked into a church. He gave his life to Christ on an Alpha course and was filled with the Holy Spirit. He started visiting prisoners and created an organisation to care for ex-offenders. He set up a homeless project and helped people with struggling with addictions, depression and debt.

Under his leadership, Alpha has spread through the prisons in the UK and seventy-six other countries around the world. Thousands have come to faith in Jesus Christ. Hundreds of men and women have found a home in churches through Caring for Ex-Offenders. The ministries Paul heads up have the potential to change millions of lives around the world.

Christ's awesome power breaks the chains of spiritual tyranny.
Inexhaustible grace.

2) Past (v3-6)

In v3-6 it says something quite mind-blowing about our past.

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."

That means we have at our disposal, now, "every spiritual blessing in Christ" – which is pretty comprehensive – and it then goes on to say how this came about.

And it's quite surprising. Your story with God goes right back to before you were born, before the world was made, before time began, before to

a point when only God was. It was then that your heavenly Father chose you.

God had it in his mind even then, because he loves you, that he would be glad to adopt you into his family. That was going to be a delight to him.

He took pleasure in deciding to lavish on you every spiritual and heavenly blessing in Christ, knowing you would have good days and bad days, knowing you would never really deserve it. All this was in his plan from the start.

Therefore your adoption into God's family has nothing to do with how good you are. Your special place in God's heart is anchored in God's eternal pleasure and purpose before you were even a twinkle in your mother's eye. I don't know if God has a wallet – but if he does, your photo is in it.

God will not change his mind about you if he becomes disappointed with the way you turn out. He knows how you will turn out. His decision to lavish his love on you is final and it's irrevocable!

And the thing is, God's wisdom is so great and his power is so awesome, that he is able to weave his total all-knowing sovereignty with our real choices and free will. Inexhaustible grace.

So God loves and redeems he has lovingly chosen to belong to him. That's the present and the past. Now for the future...

3) Future (v9-10)

In v9-10 it says that God "made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect *when the times reach their fulfilment* - to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."

That's where it's all going. God's plan is that all things which were

created *through* Christ and *for* Christ and which hold together *in* Christ will finally be united *under* Christ at the end.

God's plan is big picture and big scale; it spans every limit of created space. It starts before time began and goes on beyond time and into eternity. Inexhaustible grace.

Ending

This is the wide-angle lens through which God sees everything.

But there is also a zoom lens through which he notices every beat of your heart.

If ever you find yourself asking, "Does God really love me?" Or "Am I really saved?" Or "Is God really in charge?" Or "What about the future?" look again at Jesus' bird's eye view in Ephesians 1.

You are:

- a child of God,
- you are the apple of his eye,
- you are born from above,
- chosen before the creation of the world
- predestined to be holy,
- adopted and treasure by your heavenly Father,
- an inheritor of the kingdom of God,
- paid for in full,
- healed, and completely forgiven
- with every good thing from heaven at your disposal.