

I feel like a sandwich. I have felt like that for a long time. Carole and I felt like that when we took care of three parents in their last years with us, and at the same time we were seeing one child through high school and college and another through grad school. We were right in the middle. I feel like a sandwich at BVBC. I am responsible for the spiritual care of people, who have been stalwarts of this church and personal friends for years. I am also responsible for the spiritual care of people, who are new to BVBC, who are trying to figure out how things work around here, and whose experience of God is often very different from that of the stalwarts.

I feel like a sandwich when we read the Bible together. On one hand I am a student of the Bible. That means that I read it, I devour it over and over, and I listen to what the Church has been saying about the Bible for 2000 years. It's a never-ending process. On the other hand, I am a student of people and of the times in which we live. That means I am always listening to all kinds of people and trying to understand them. I am always listening and trying to understand the meaning of what is happening in our culture. It's a never-ending process. The Bible, even though it is old, speaks to our culture, and our culture, even though it is passing away, limits the way we hear the Bible.

In these ways I feel like the peanut butter and jelly between two slices of bread, and I want to be the best peanut butter and jelly sandwich I can be. You remember the best ones your mom made for you. She smeared on lots of peanut butter and gobs of your favorite jelly, and when you squeezed the sandwich, the peanut butter and jell oozed out on your fingers, and you had to lick it off before it fell on the floor. If I have to be squeezed, I want what oozes out to delight you and to please God. He's the one making the sandwich.

In the Heavenly Realms

So, let's take a bite out of this sandwich by reading Ephesians 1:3. **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.**

This verse sets the stage for the meaning of Ephesians. So, I need to set the stage for this verse. Central to verse three is a promise: **the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . has blessed us**. We know from last Sunday that the pronoun **us** refers back to verse one where the apostle called the Ephesian Christians **saints**. It sends people right through the roof for him to call church people **saints**. Can you imagine yourself saying, "Oh, yes, I am one of the saints over at Brandywine Valley Baptist Church"? Not gonna happen!

We don't want people to think we're too moral. It's okay to say we're good. That's vague and squishy, and it makes you feel good. It's not okay to say we're moral. That puts expectations on us that make us feel really uncomfortable. We want to pick and choose the moral expectations that apply to us, and besides, we need people to think we're a little bad. That gives a dash of danger, adventure, and unpredictability to our lives. The fear of too many moral expectations is one reason many people don't go to church. And then they go, they take a chance, and the very Sunday they go, they hear a Bible verse that calls church people saints. They just go ballistic.

I have good news for all you people who are worried about not measuring up to moral expectations. Of course, you don't measure up. Get over it, and open yourself up to a new possibility. When Paul called the Ephesian Christians **saints**, he used a loaded word. Any time

you see the word **saints** in the Bible, it means the people of God. Being the people of God is about who you are or even whose you are before it's about what you do. If you can make room in your soul for that idea, it will set you as free as a bird in a treetop.

So Ephesians 1:3 opens with a promise to the people of God: God **has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ**. Did you ever start to pick up a suitcase and instantly realize that if you did, you were going to hurt yourself? You needed to take things out of the suitcase before you picked it up. Don't try to "lift" verse three all at one time. There are several items in this biblical suitcase. Let's take three of them out one at a time. We'll be able to handle the suitcase much more easily.

The first item lets us know right away that we don't know what Paul was talking about. God **has blessed us in the heavenly realms**. What are **the heavenly realms**? It's easy to think Paul meant heaven, but he didn't. How do I know that? I know that, because someone else a lot smarter taught me. Now, it's my turn to teach you. What we are about to do is an example of how Bible study can be serious without becoming academic.

This phrase **in the heavenly realms** occurs three other times in Ephesians. Ephesians 1:20-21: God **raised him (Jesus) from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms** (there's our phrase, and watch what comes next) **far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come**. What is that – **all rule and authority, power and dominion**? We have to keep reading to find out, but whatever all that is; Christ is supreme over it **in the heavenly realms**.

Now, Ephesians 3:10: God's **intent** (in creating the Church) **was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms**. This verse is important, because it places **rulers and authorities** in the heavenly realms with Christ, where He is supreme.

The last verse, Ephesians 6:12, is troubling. **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**. This isn't heaven. This is more like the "Cosmic 'Hood." This is a dangerous place. This is where evil forces operate that are antagonistic to the Church and to all human flourishing. And they are not far away from us. They pose real danger to us right here, right now. They fragment. They betray. They kill. They are not all-powerful. They can be resisted, but they can't be eradicated – not yet and not by us!

They are like a force of nature – like a tornado, hurricane, earthquake, wildfire, gravity, or genetic mutation. But nature, even when it destroys, does not destroy on purpose. **The powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil** destroy on purpose. Clergy, therapists, lawyers, doctors, law enforcement officials, soldiers, and others see this malignant will at work, and we weep and rage at what it does to people.

Every Spiritual Blessing

For now we don't need to say any more about such malice. We know enough to take the second item out of our biblical suitcase. It is God's provision on how to cope in this dangerous world. The apostle made the startling statement that God **has blessed us with**

every spiritual blessing. There's an old Christian song that says, "Count your blessings; name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done." Do you ever do that other than at Thanksgiving in November? If we counted our blessings right now without a rehearsal, nearly everything we listed would have to do with health, prosperity, freedom, and people who love us. "God blessed me with a new car." "That lab report came back clear. I am so happy!" "We have great kids. We are blessed." "I got a job."

There's nothing wrong with any of that. Those benefits are great blessings that God gives us. The apostle had something else in mind: **spiritual blessings**. These are blessings that nature can't give. Only God can give them. We are subject to forces of evil that can ruin our lives. God has given us spiritual blessings that are designed to bless and not curse, to build up and not tear down, and they are more than a match for the **spiritual forces of evil** that threaten human life with disintegration and destruction.

It would be only natural for us to ask, "What are these spiritual blessings? How do we take advantage of them?" The third item in our biblical suitcase is in a sense the complete answer to our questions. Paul expanded on that answer later in the letter, and we will follow his train of thought in the weeks to come. But for now let's take the third item out of our biblical suitcase and talk about it.

In Christ

God **has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ**. The phrase **in Christ** occurs 11 times in the first 14 verses of Ephesians and many other times later on. What does it mean? I'm going to make this really simple. If I ask Carole, "Where are my keys?" and she says, "They are in your desk," the little word *in* tells where something is to be found.

Every spiritual blessing is to be found **in Christ**. God is pleased to release into the **heavenly realms** powerful, benevolent, spiritual forces that are more than a match for the **powers of this dark world** and the **spiritual forces of evil**. He releases them **in Christ**. Jesus said one time: "**In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.**" (John 16:33)

He wasn't being careless with words. He of whose gentleness the Gospel of Matthew says (Matthew 12:20): **a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out** is the one of whose authority Ephesians says (Ephesians 1:20-21): God **raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms far above all rule and authority, power and dominion**. He is the conduit through whom the powers of the age to come are brought to bear decisively on this dark world. And we the saints, the people of God, who loyal to Jesus Christ, are the beneficiaries of His blessings. Let the Church, the people of God, wake from our mesmerizing, secular enchantment. Let us wake up to who we are and what we have **in Christ**.

Take-aways

Since Ephesians will disclose **every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ**, let's make April "Read Ephesians Month." No matter what else you are reading, read Ephesians at least two times each week between now and May 5. Let's immerse ourselves in

Ephesians. Also, at least once between now and May 5 read Ephesians all the way through at one sitting. If you prefer to listen, you can do it on your smart phone, iPod, or tablet. Here is an exceptional resource: youversion.com. It's free, and it works offline. Reading Ephesians like that puts us all on the same page, it prepares you to hear my sermons on Ephesians, and it helps make the Bible an open book for you.

And did you notice how verse three begins? **Praise be to the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ.** Do you ever feel like your prayers are always “gimme, gimme, gimme?” The Jews, who gave the Church the name “The People of God” also gave the Church a better way to pray. Many Jewish prayers to this day begin like this: Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech ha-olam. “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, O King eternal!” That’s how Ephesians begins. Each time we read Ephesians from now through May 5, let’s take time and praise God for His blessings, material and especially His spiritual blessings in Christ. “Count your blessings; name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.”