

# Ephesians 1.1-14 & Psalm 51

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*Holiness is what faith looks like*

St John's Harborne

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## In Him

People often ask me what football team I support. In fact I think I'm probably asked that more often than people ask me about Jesus! To be quite honest I prefer cricket. (As I typed that sentence I listened to Joe Root hit a boundary to get 50 against Ireland, having stolen the strike to stop Ollie Pope reaching 200 before tea!)

But I do vaguely follow football. In my children I liked Spurs, but mainly because of Gary Linker. When he left and moved to Japan, nine-year-old Ben was devastated, and I decided to support **L**iverpool instead. The thing is though,

I've never been to Anfield (that's their stadium),  
I've never owned a replica Liverpool shirt or scarf,  
I've never seen a full match live, even on TV,  
I couldn't name most of the team.

I am nothing compared to a *proper* fan, who can name not only the current first team but dozens of previous players too, they know FA cup results, own a replica shirt, maybe a season ticket – or a subscription so they can watch on TV.

I wonder what the equivalent would be for Christians? Maybe instead of naming Liverpool's first team, do we need to name all 12 disciples? (It's trickier than you might think!) Do we need to have read all 66 books in the Bible before we can call ourselves a child of God? Can we even *name* them all? Again, it's harder than you might think, especially those pesky minor prophets.

Our reading from Ephesians 1 shows what Paul says makes and marks out God's people. It turns out it's Jesus!

Paul got a bit carried away... it's quite the list! ¶ God's people are: ¶ **holy** (2), ¶ **blessed** (3), ¶ **chosen** (4, 11) and ¶ **predestined** (5, 11), ¶ **adopted** (5), ¶ **given grace** (6) – in fact *lavished* with grace (7-8), ¶ **redeemed** and ¶ **forgiven** (7), ¶ **heirs** (9), ¶ **included in Christ** (13), ¶ **marked** and **sealed** with the **Holy Spirit** (13). Forget naming Liverpool's first team – that is what it means to be **God's people** (1), and it all comes in and through Jesus – 14 times Paul says 'in (or through) him'.

All this is given or done to us by God – in his generosity he holds nothing back but gives and lavishes such things on us. But what good is a gift unless we use it?

I was given this gift by a much-loved family member several years ago. I have never opened it, because it's not something I need or have use for. It's moved house with me at least three times. I'm really not sure why we still have it! *Toss it aside.*

## Moving mountains?

How can we avoid doing that with all that God gives us in Jesus? Paul calls the Christians in Ephesus **faithful in Christ Jesus** (1) – what does that look like? Perhaps it's about miracles and casting out demons? After all when his disciples failed to cast out a demon, Jesus said to them,

'Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this **ſ** mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.'

*Matthew 17.20-21 (NIV)*

Four years ago Jess and I took a month off work and travelled round New Zealand in a camper van. It was an amazing trip in a wonderful country.


New Zealand is set up primarily for outdoors-type holidays, and there are several 'Great Walks' in some of their most spectacular scenery. One of them is called the Tongariro Alpine Crossing: 22.5km, a 2.5km climb up and down. My activity tracker estimated we needed to drink over 4 litres of water to make up for the dehydration, and it took us more than six hours to complete. But it was absolutely spectacular. And then Jess broke her ankle.

Thankfully we only had 1km to go, so she hobbled along, and then waited at the end of the walk while I went to fetch our van to pick her up and we drove back to the campsite.

When she removed her boot, the ankle crunched when she moved it, there was shooting pain up the outside of her leg from the ankle to the knee that made her feel sick and faint. The ankle itself was flat and had lost its point, with a groove down the middle, and it felt nothing like the ankle on her other foot. Wasn't God wise to give us two of things! Because she'd left the boot on for the drive home there wasn't much swelling, but she was pretty confident she had broken it. As an A&E doctor, she would send a patient presenting like that straight to have an X-ray.

We called 999, who told us to go to the nearest hospital. Our drive there was almost silent. I was annoyed that Jess had potentially ruined the trip, and I believe I told her that if she needed to fly home I would stay behind and finish it without her... I don't *think* I would have actually done that though!

As we drove, I prayed that the break would be healed and she would be left simply with a sprain. I didn't pray out loud though because I didn't have enough faith to believe anything would actually happen.

We arrived at the hospital, still in all our gear from the walk we'd done that morning. The triage nurse agreed Jess had probably broken it – the shooting pain up the leg is a classic sign – so she  put her in a wheelchair and booked an X-ray.

While we waited for the scan to come back, we sat there and looked through the photos from the walk. After a while Jess said, slightly sheepishly, that the pain had gone completely. She felt the ankle and the bone was exactly like the other one. The X-ray came back and everything was absolutely fine – all she was left with was a minor sprain, exactly as I had prayed. They sent us on our way with no cast, simply a compression sock. On the way back I owned up about my prayer!

There is no doubt in my mind that was a miracle. To go from crunching bone and shooting pain to a minor sprain in an hour and a half – that doesn't happen without God's intervention.

Some of us here will have prayed for and seen miracles happen. But I'm confident that *all* of us will have prayed for miracles that *didn't* happen. I would have traded in Jess's ankle and the rest of that holiday in a heartbeat for God to heal my friend Simon of cancer, but he didn't, and I still miss him.

If responding to God's gifts in faith only meant praying for and seeing miracles then we'd be in trouble. And in any case, Jesus' point about faith moving mountains isn't about the greatness of faith, but the greatness of God *in whom* we have faith.

Perhaps Paul's reason for God giving so lavishly can help us understand how we must respond to such generosity.

## Holiness and praise

Twice Paul says God's people are chosen.

¶ Verse 4: **[the Father] chose us in [Jesus] before the creation of the world** – why? – **to be holy and blameless in his sight**. Then again in ¶ verse 11: **In [Jesus] we were also chosen...** why? verse 12: **in order that we... might be for the praise of his glory**.

That last phrase pops up at the end as well, summing up the whole section (verses 3-14 are a single sentence): so all that is **to the praise of his glory** (14).

**God calls us to respond to all he gives by living as the people he has declared us to be: holy and blameless.** When we do that, we bring him praise; God is holy, so when we his people, live holy lives, we show him to the world – and that brings him praise. We sometimes say imitation is the highest form of flattery. It's like that only in a much more profound way.

And in fact it is even more than that. JI Packer writes,

**I** If we want to be fruitful in evangelism, we must cultivate holiness of life.

*Packer, Rediscovering Holiness, 35*

Why? **Because if we proclaim a life-changing Saviour but our lives are no different, no-one will listen.** I think Packer is right: holiness gives our witness credibility; without it, we will see precious little fruit. Dare I ask if one reason we are struggling in evangelism today is because we've lost an emphasis on cultivating **holiness of life** that earlier generations had? Yes the prevailing culture is a challenge – but so it was in Jesus' day too.

But what *is* **holiness of life**? What does it *mean* to **be holy and blameless** (4)?

It's not about being practically perfect in every way like Mary Poppins – but having integrity, where what we do comes from who we are, where our words and deeds match up.

I said earlier how much I like cricket – well there's one thing that *really* annoys me and it's a phrase used a lot by England's cricketers. The ECB used it as a marketing campaign before the 2019 Cricket World Cup: **Express Yourself**.

I think what they mean is they want to play cricket without any consideration for anything or anyone other than how they feel or what they want to do in that moment. How very selfish. It's a very 21<sup>st</sup> century way of playing sport, but it's an attitude as old as the Garden of Eden. Shakespeare put it like this in *Hamlet*: **This above all: to thine own self be true.**

But what if **thine own self** is deceitful? Jeremiah said wisely (17.9): **The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?** If Jeremiah is right – and I really think he is – expressing **thine own self** means living a lie.



Not so for us, Jesus' sisters and brothers. For us, true integrity – **holiness of life** – means not expressing who we are *in here* [tap heart](#) but who we are *in him*. I don't want to express *myself* in my day-to-day life, I want to express *Jesus*, I want *his* treasure to shine through all the cracks in this old jar of clay, I want people to look at me and see *him*, I want to express and live out the life won for me by *Jesus*. Packer again:

¶ Holy people practice good works, not to earn God's present or future favour, but as a way of laying hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of them.

*Packer, Rediscovering Holiness, 97*

We are used to things like this. ¶ Jess and I were at a wedding yesterday – but is the marriage the moment the couple is announced as husband and wife, or the years of love and faithfulness that (hopefully) follow? ¶ Bishop Tom made me a deacon in 2008 – but is my ordination the moment he laid hands on me or the 15 years of ministry since? It's the same in everyday things too: ¶ a meal is more than cooking some food; ¶ playing squash is more than buying trainers and a squash racquet; ¶ travelling somewhere is more than buying a bus ticket.

In a similar sort of way the moment of salvation, the gift of new life and the Spirit, being made holy in God's sight – all of the wonderful stuff we read in Ephesians 1 – it all comes *first* and it all comes only from God; there's nothing we can do to earn or add to the salvation he gives us in Jesus. What comes *next* – and what *must* come next – is a lifetime of discipleship, maturing and growing and cultivating holiness. Paul says to the Philippians:

**I** Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

*Philippians 2.12-13 (NIV)*

Even here God helps us, but unlike salvation it's a joint effort.

## Repentance (Psalm 51)

I could give examples of what holiness looks like. We might talk about spiritual disciplines like prayer and fasting. I could encourage you to read the Bible – I do, by the way – because it

is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and **training in righteousness**, so that the servant of God may be **thoroughly equipped for every good work**.

*2 Timothy 3.16 (NIV)*

But instead of going through various examples briefly, we're going to explore one in some depth, and then move into a time of response.

One of the first steps we must make as disciples is to repent, to turn away from our sin and turn towards God. Our repentance, and the forgiveness we immediately receive from God, is the foundation of our new life as his children.

But just as it is the foundation of that life, so it is the pattern of that life: we can't live it out without daily repentance. JI Packer:

**J** The Christian life has to be an exercise of continual repentance before it is anything else.

*Packer, Rediscovering Holiness, 123*

That doesn't mean going round looking miserable, crying out, 'We are worms!' It doesn't mean wallowing in self-pity or hiding away from others in shame.

But neither does it mean what happens in many churches each week. Having a weekly time of confession is a great idea in theory – it's actually required in Church of England services – but in practice it becomes a cursory 'sorry God' before we move on. Repentance is so much more than that, it's an attitude or posture.

This is how Packer describes true repentance:

¶ Repentance means not mere routine words of regret as one asks for pardon without one's heart being involved, but a deliberate confessing, an explicit self-humbling, and a sensing of shame in the presence of God as one contemplates one's failures...

¶ Unless and until it is re-established that the Christian life for everyone is a life of self-scrutiny, self-humbling, and daily repentance for daily sins, Satan will continue to score.

*Packer, Rediscovering Holiness, 133 & 140*

There is a moment in the Bible where this all happens, and I think it stands as a good model for us to explore.

King David was a **man after God's own heart** (see 1 Samuel 13.14). He listened to God, worshipped God with all his heart, led God's people faithfully, cared about all God cared about.

Then one day, when David was supposed to be leading his armies in battle, he was in his palace and spied Bathsheba, the beautiful wife of Uriah. ¶ He sinned in his lust, and he sinned when he summoned her to his palace – where Bathsheba was unable to resist the King's advances. It was a terrible abuse of power.

Bathsheba became pregnant; David panicked. It was obviously not Uriah's child so David arranged for him to be killed in battle. Never was it more true that two 'wrongs' *don't* make a 'right'.

David thought he got away with it; that his sin was secret. Then one day the prophet Nathan came to him and told him this story:

'There were two men, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a large number of sheep, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms.

'Now a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep to prepare a meal for the traveller. Instead, he took the ewe lamb from the poor man and prepared it.'

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, 'As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.'

Then Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!'

*2 Samuel 12.1-7 (NIV, abridged)*

God had given David everything he desired, and yet he took the one thing Uriah had and killed him to cover it up. . Do you know that sinking feeling of dread, the horror of realising you've done wrong and been found out?

David said to Nathan: **'I have sinned against the Lord'** (2 Samuel 7.13), and then he wrote what we know as Psalm 51. Let's turn to it and see how David repented of his sin, as a model for us.<sup>i</sup>

## 1. **Focused on God (Psalm 51.1-2)**

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash away all my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin.

*Psalm 51.1-2 (NIV)*

David appeals to God's **unfailing love**, to his **great compassion**. God knows us even before we are born – he knows we won't be perfect, and yet he loves us anyway – and so he is always ready to forgive when we turn back to him and ask him for forgiveness.

## 2. **Honest about our guilt (Psalm 51.3-5)**

For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is always before me.  
Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight;  
so you are right in your verdict  
and justified when you judge.  
Surely I was sinful at birth,  
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

*Psalm 51.3-5 (NIV)*

**We are not sinners because we sin, but rather we sin because we are sinners** (Packer, 134). David doesn't pretend that he's a good person; he knows he isn't, and he knows that ultimately all sin is sin against God. He doesn't pretend – he's honest about it.

But this isn't wallowing in self-pity, it is the **godly sorrow** Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret.

*2 Corinthians 7.10 (NIV)*

God doesn't leave us in our sin, in our guilt, in our shame.

### 3. Hungry for forgiveness (Psalm 51.6-9)

Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;  
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.  
Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins  
and blot out all my iniquity.

*Psalm 51.6-9 (NIV)*

David is desperate to be cleansed of his sin, to be clean – look at how he can't bear for God to see the stain of sin on his heart: **hide your face!** he says. This man loves God, who knows God, and who knows how serious his sin is. He can hardly bear it.

We are right to feel ashamed when we sin – but not only does God take away our sin, he takes away our shame and replaces it with joy and gladness – the shame is gone, and instead we can rejoice. We are truly washed **clean** and given a fresh start. This is true forgiveness – God's response to true repentance. Indeed true forgiveness can *only* come from God, who *alone* can cleanse us of our sin.



#### 4. ] Hopeful for new life (Psalm 51.10-12)

Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

*Psalm 51.10-12 (NIV)*

This isn't a weak, English 'I hope to be there' but the hope of Hebrews 11: confidence because of what God has *already done* for us in Jesus. God doesn't simply wipe the slate clean, he gives us a pure heart, a **steadfast** and **willing spirit** – a heart and a spirit more willing to respond to God in gratitude. How I long for such a spirit!

This spirit wants continually to grow towards God in holiness. It isn't glamorous or easy – it's **steadfast**. God doesn't wave a magic 'holiness' wand over us, but neither does he leave us to do it in our own strength. He declares us to be holy in Jesus, and then gives us his Spirit and his commands to help us live it out, as he works it in. It's a joint effort – we work out gift of our salvation while he works in us.

## Holiness is what faith looks like

God declares his people to be holy – and gives us his Spirit to help us be the holy people that we are in his sight.

So we don't strive for holiness to earn God's favour but to live out the new life he gives us in Jesus: **holiness is what faith looks like.**

A holy people bring glory and praise to God: we are holy as he is holy. But because we are a work in progress, our life needs to follow a daily pattern of repentance and forgiveness.

Packer quotes bishop Stephen Neill:

**I** Here is the heart of it all. To move forward on the road of holiness means to know Jesus better. To him we always return. The better we come to know Him, the more plainly we shall see how little like him we are...

*Stephen Neill, Christian Holiness, 128*  
*quoted in Packer, Rediscovering Holiness, 143*

I suppose I could have saved us all the last half an hour by saying, simply: I want to know Jesus better, I want to learn who I am in Jesus, I want to be holy like Jesus, so I can to share Jesus more and more, to the glory and praise of God.

How about you?

## Response

I'm going to put those four steps from the Psalm 51 model on the screen. You may want to respond by doing all four at once – but there may be one of them that you are really struggling with, or that the Spirit is nudging you to say, 'You need to have a go at this one today.'

Repentance is:

**Focused on God** – the source, the giver of it all

**Honest about our guilt** – we sin because we are sinners

**Hungry for forgiveness** – only God can make us clean

**Hopeful for new life** – God declares us and helps us be holy

Or you may want to respond by simply saying, 'Jesus I want to know you and how much you love me.'

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<sup>1</sup> This section, see Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness*, 134-136.