

In the Heavens

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev Maurice Roberts

[0 : 00] I'll just turn to the chapter of the Word of God which we've had together, that is Ephesians 1. And I would like to look at the verses which begin at verse 3 and run on from there to verse 12.

And you might say to me, that's a long text and a large text. How can I justify taking so large a text? Well I would like to do so like this, if justification is thought to be necessary.

That this is one sentence, evidently, in the original language that Paul was writing in. The Greek language of course. And I think it would be true to say, without any fear of contradiction, that this is the longest sentence in the Bible.

So, it's as though Paul, having begun to write at verse 3, speaking about God the Father and what we owe to him, finds it difficult to know how to stop his sentence.

And so it goes on and on and on. Now, in the translation we have in the English language, you notice, at least in the authorised version that I have before me, you have at verse 3 a colon at the end of the sentence, verse 4 a colon, verse 5 a comma, and so on.

[1 : 26] Verse 6 is a full stop. But that really is only because the English language cannot sustain such a large thought without breaking it into pieces. But in the original, I think it's agreed by the scholars, that really there's no full stop there.

It goes on and on and on and on. And obviously the reason for this is that Paul's thoughts were so overwhelming, he didn't know how to put an end to them.

So, being in prison, and writing of course, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as always, this beloved apostle to the Gentiles begins to open up for us the treasures of blessings, which are ours in Christ.

And you can well understand that having once begun, there is no ending to them all. He being so profound in his understanding of the consequences of the cross, and the implications of the gospel for the people of God, and seeing such endless vistas of glory, and wonder, and blessing, and spiritual romance, opening up before his wandering eyes, feels that he cannot put his full stop to the sentence.

So on and on and on it goes. And I suppose, really we must say that language itself, language itself breaks down under the glories of divine thought.

[3 : 02] Our vocabulary is inadequate to say what we need to say about God. When we come to bless him, and to thank him, and to worship him, my friends, all the dictionaries in the world are inadequate.

We have not got speech, wherewith to praise God. And we have not got grammar, wherewith to praise God. Our grammar, our syntax, our use of commas, and the semicolons, and all that, they are just not able to bear the weight, or sustain the pressure, of all the wonder and the glory, that is bursting forth.

If you like illustrations, then I would in passing just say that, if you like this great sentence, resembles a champagne bottle. You know what they do, not that we drink it, but they put something inside, and screw it in, and then they pull, and you know what happens next?

It all comes gushing out with effervescence. So you have difficulty in containing it, and controlling it. So, my dearest friends, so is this sentence. It is a veritable theological champagne bottle.

You can't keep it in. It's all coming out, and there's no end of it all. And the effervescence is, as it's like, spilling wondrously, flowing over onto the table of the gospel.

[4 : 30] Here it is. And I want to glance at it with you. I can't in any sense pretend to be expounding all the theology of these words. It would require years to do so.

That beloved Dr. Lloyd-Jones, of course, spent many, many months doing just that. And his books and similar books are on our shelves and available to us.

But on this occasion of Thanksgiving, I want, if I may, just to touch on this great statement, this wonderful extensive sentence, which is virtually one long peon of praise and anthem of gratitude to God, such as, I think, familiar to us and suitable for us on a Thanksgiving morning.

So he begins at verse 3. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.

Now, my friends, there are things here which are not easy for us, with all the study in the world, to understand. And one of them is the subject of these heavenly places.

[5 : 55] I do not know that I ever read anybody, any commentary or any theologian, who really has satisfied my mind that he has understood what is meant by the heavenly places.

You get them, of course, more than once in this epistle. You get them in chapter 2, if I remember, and chapter 6. But I want to turn to the references. Certainly it is we get them more than once in this epistle to the Ephesians.

What are these heavenly blessings, heavenly places? Well, the best I can do is this, that when Christ died and rose again and ascended to glory, that our union with him is such that he lifted us, in a spiritual and moral way, to a new dimension.

So that, if you like, the Christian is not living with his feet altogether on the ground. The Christian is, if you like, suspended somewhere in a heavenly state.

And he looks down upon life in a way that other people cannot do. I think when we're converted, you realize at once that your perspective on this world changes.

[7 : 18] You know, when you're unconverted, as all of us were, and certainly I was very much so once upon a time, we look back on our unconverted state, and we were very much a part of the world.

And we were on a level with the world. And we looked at the world from the standpoint of our feet on the ground. We thought the world a great place, with a thousand nice things to do.

But once we were converted, somehow our perceptions changed. And we become like men who look down on the ground. Now, you know very well from experience that when you go up in an airplane, the world looks a very different place from what it does look when you have your feet on the ground.

When you're in this world, and walking about in the streets, we're like ants, aren't we? Tiny little creatures going to and fro. And we're all part of this present life. When you go up in the air like that, you suddenly see what a small place this world is.

And it's mountains and hills and rivers and so on. You quickly pass them by. So, my dearest friends, that's the view we have as Christians. We are looking down on this little world.

[8 : 30] We no longer emulate the ambitions of those who are living for this present life. We regard its pleasures and its interests as just so much straw, just so much dung, compared with the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord.

And we see and feel in the heavenly places a proximity to heaven itself. Now, certainly we are not yet in a state of death. But, as Christians, we are closer to a state of glory than we are to a state of sin.

You know Boston's great distinction. A state of innocence, a state of sin, a state of grace, a state of glory. The fourfold state. We're all familiar with those distinctions. The very wonderful and true and helpful they are.

But my point is that as Christians in the heavenly places, we are closer to the glory state than we are to our former unconverted state. We have been lifted to these heavenly places.

And we are in a realm under which we are under mighty spiritual influences. We have been lifted to being the bride of Christ.

[9 : 46] Christ. And Christ is already far above all principality and power and might and dominion and every name that is named not only in this world but in that which is to come. And therefore, we who are spiritually united to him by faith, we also come under the influence of these spiritual forces which involve, of course, sanctification and the presence of angels and the proximity to God and the nearness to those who have gone before us.

The great cloud of witnesses. We are conscious of spiritual things at work and round about us that we are not just simply living on the material plane but we are lifted up with these spiritual blessings in heavenly places.

Now then, I am not sure if you altogether are satisfied of my little attempt at explaining the heavenly places. Indeed, that is only the beginnings of it. But oh, my friends, even that, even that glimpse, that tiny, tiny glimpse of the reality is such that when we think of our privilege as Christians, we cry with the Apostle, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has made us to have these great honours and favours conferred upon us that God should have chosen us to this. And that's immediately what he goes on to say in verse 4. According as he has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world that we shall be holy and without blame before him in love. Now there are two dimensions in verse 4. One dimension looks into the past, the foundations of the world and before them. And the other looks into the future, the purpose and the end in view of God's purpose.

[11:45] We glance at both of these things in connection with our gratitude to the Father and to God for all our mercies this day. And he says that we should bless God because all that we have in Christ today in this life is the consequence not of anything we have done nor anything we have deserved nor anything we have earned.

No human merit enters into it. No meritorious act of faith or decision on our part is the cause of our present mercies. No, no, he says.

It is God the Father who has chosen us in Christ. Now notice that we were in Christ before we were created.

We were in Christ he says before Genesis chapter 1. Isn't this mysterious? Who can understand it? Oh, theology! What a glory it is!

Before I existed, before the world existed. We were in Christ if we are Christians. How do I know? Well, he tells us before the foundation of the world.

[12:55] He chose us in Christ. So, our being in Christ antedated or if you like preceded Genesis chapter 1.

You get the same thing in Titus chapter 1 where Paul says that God who cannot lie promised these things before the world began. Now that seems ridiculous if I may reverently say so.

How can God give promises before the world began? Because there's no one to hear those promises. Ah, but there was. There was our Redeemer. There was our Blessed Christ who acted on our behalf even before the world began.

He was then, even then, acting for us as the covenant head and receiving those promises from his Father for us and in the fullness of times reveals those truths to us and those promises are the same as we have in verse 4 that one day we shall be holy and without blemish or blame rather without blame before him in love.

Now that has regard to the future time does it not? With one massive sweep with one grand stroke of his brush the Apostle Paul looks from the beginnings of time and before the beginnings right through to the end of time and beyond.

[14:22] What a verse that is. Oh what a writer this is. What a theologian this is. He talks one minute about things before the world began that we were chosen by God and then immediately goes right to the end of history and beyond it and he says the purpose is that when the curtain falls on the history of our little world that you and I who were chosen in Christ will at last be holy and without blame and we'll be before him in love.

Now when he says holy he doesn't mean partially holy. The Lord's people are partially holy. we have a holiness which is in part right here of course sanctification and regeneration they make us holy in our heart.

You know the wonderful phrase that Professor Murray has in referring to Romans 6 he calls that definitive sanctification. You and I would call it the new birth and the new birth makes men holy and my beloved friends we must never try to get away from it that the only test the only proof the only ultimate mark of being in Christ is holiness and the love of holiness neither gifts nor eloquence nor prayers that are beautiful nor poetical nor the ability to write nor the ability to be an editor nor the ability to preach none of those things are marks of salvation and marks of being in Christ the only ultimate mark of being a Christian is holiness and the love of holiness because the devil can counterfeits everything the devil is more clever and more gifted than any of us put together and all of us put together and yet the devil has no holiness and the thing that God looks for in his people is just this holiness that we should be in character as he is and we must never get away from that in this busy material modern world that regeneration is evinced and proved by nothing more nor less clearly than holiness of heart and the love of holiness and therefore the hatred of sin you cannot

love holiness without hating sin and without being grieved at the commission of sin so in the end of the day my dearly beloved here is our destiny he says to be perfect in holiness to be without the slightest blame and to be with God in Christ in love now this is exactly what our Lord himself prays for in his high priestly prayer that the love wherewith thou my father hath loved me may be in them and that therefore heaven is a world of love heaven will be a place where all will love one another all the Lord's people will be suffused with love for one another they won't all be as great some will be much greater like this apostle

Paul he'll be far higher in the kingdom than I will be but he will be nonetheless filled with love for me and I for him and no one will lack anything there because even the very least and lowest will be filled with love every vessel will be filled with love though it may be a small one it will be filled with love though a great one equally filled with love and the least and lowest will be respected and honoured by the great and the mighty because all will realise that we have nothing but what sovereign love has given to us from eternity the apostle Paul will be the first one to say when he speaks to you and to me he will say oh my beloved brothers and sisters welcome into this happy place you are the Gentiles for whom I was given a special ministry I welcome you into this happy abode he will say and come come my dearly beloved because although God has given so much to me yet to Christ you are just as precious as I am we are all in this together we are to be before him in love and then in verse 5 he goes on like this having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself according to the good pleasure of his will now why does he say this about predestination doesn't this spoil it oh Paul you could have left this out why Paul are you introducing controversy you were starting such a lovely sentence all of this was so sweet and encouraging why do you have to spoil it Paul by bringing this terrible word that nobody enjoys of predestination ah well he would say to us it's because my very dear Christian friends we must understand that our proud hearts will never give

God the praise that he deserves until we appreciate that we did not have any of this for our own sake that it was a sovereign grace of God fallen human nature so ready to take something to itself we say oh surely God loves me because I'm a little bit better than they are living in the Hilton scheme or living in some other place surely God loved me because I was more devout and more religious and the apostle says away with such a treasonable thought not at all we are just as hateful and as damnable as any man ever was the elect are not less sinful than the reprobate we are just as wicked as any who ever lived you and I we are just little sparks of hell little chips off the block of damnation that's all we are and yet God has predestinated us to the adoption of children that is to say he is determined to make us his children according to his own good pleasure now the good pleasure of God means to say that as he was thinking about all men and women he would ever make he chose one here and another there to be his own peculiar children not for any reason whatsoever except his own free sovereign choice and does not that make you hang your heads and say then why am I here Lord because I'm worse than most of mankind why Lord should I be amongst these people because thou knowest that my life is just a sheer travesty of wickedness why Lord should I be one of these who are so highly favoured for thou knowest oh Lord

[21 : 23] I was a ringleader in worldliness and in treachery and in infidelity thou knowest Lord how often I curse thee thou knowest Lord how often thy growth thy sabbath and despise thy truth ah says the apostle but here's the point it wasn't anything to do with our merit nor our demerit it is the determinative will of God it was his good pleasure the pleasure of his will why has he done it verse 6 he tells us to the praise of the glory of his grace wherein he has made us accepted in the beloved in other words we need to know why God has chosen such evil creatures as I am why God has looked upon us why God has deigned to do so much to bring us to himself and make us his sons and daughters to put his name upon our brow and his love within our breast to be preparing a glorious kingdom above for us why all of that for me the answer is it is that he will glorify himself he chooses the worst in order to exhibit his own grace to the world he doesn't choose the wise nor the mighty nor the great but he chooses the things that are not to bring to naught the things that are we are all of us babes and fools in the sight of

God like the wild us is cult we know nothing we are rebels we are outlaws and God chooses the very worst like me says the apostle a persecutor I who chased Christians and brought them to prison and put them to death I who was keeping the clothes of the persecutors when they were killing Stephen when they took off their jackets and lifted their stones they put their jackets in a pile around my feet he says and there I was thanking God that this wicked heretic Stephen was being

stoned to death that's the kind of sinner God has mercy on in order to show the riches of his grace and his mercy that God could even save the chief of sinners is it not so with you it certainly is with me I know where I deserve to be I know what God should and might well have done to me if justice had had its righteous course but oh says the apostle it's this mercy of God now it is to the praise of his glory the glory of his grace grace is one thing the glory of grace is another thing and the praise of the glory of grace is another thing still there are three things here grace is God's unmerited mercy his undeserved favor to sinners and the glory of his grace is to say the magnitude of it the the immensity of it the tremendous effect of that grace upon the world maybe you know the story about a famous scientist his name was Alexander

Fleming I think and he was studying in a laboratory and one day he was looking into the little plates and things in which scientists grow various sorts of algae and bacteria perhaps I shouldn't call them that little cultures anyway of things like moss and lichen that sort of thing I'm trying to explain it in simple language and he noticed that by accident as so often happens apparently in science by accident he appears to drop a certain thing onto this culture and it was called penicillin penicillium notatum he dropped a little of this onto this culture and he noticed that immediately it had an immediate and a startling effect it killed off a lot of the cells apparently in this culture and he noticed that and of course all the world now knows the marvellous medical benefits of penicillin which God as it were revealed to this man by a sort of accident well let me use that as an illustration the glory of his grace means the immense effect of God's goodness upon the world the catastrophic if I may use that effect for good of grace upon the world that is the glory of grace the glory of grace is that it lifts nations out of their ditch of wickedness it lifted the whole Roman empire out of its heathendom within 200 years

Constantine the great the first emperor to embrace Christianity began at once to make laws in which he gave freedom to the gospel and encouraged the preaching of the gospel and immediately the whole empire was lifted up that's the glory of grace and when revival comes to Britain and to Scotland and to any other country again the glory of grace will be visible in this it will lift whole societies out of the ditch thousands will be affected as indeed they are right now today in some parts of the world like Korea now that is not simply grace that's the glory of grace and grace is the most glorious thing of all and we believe in the glories of grace and my dear friend God is aiming at the praise of the glory of his grace what's that that means that in the end of the day when heaven is open to his people then all the redeemed universe will pray for his grace they will bless them for the glory of grace and they will wave palm branches and cast their crowns before him and they will shout for the glories of his grace and that is how the history of the world is now continuing it will go until the glories of his grace are finally known because he is made of accepted in the beloved now at this point he brings us to see Christ again the beloved is Christ and oh friends let us dwell a moment on that word the beloved here is his description of

Jesus Christ the beloved son of God the beloved only begotten of God because he was in the bosom of the father he was face to face with God the love wherewith thou hast loved me he says oh father the hour is come glorify thou me with that glory which I had with thee before the world was here is the beloved now friends here is the encouragement you as Christians are in the beloved and you cannot help but be beloved to God if you are in the one who is beloved then how beloved are you and how encouraging for you to know that you are in the one who God loves with an infinite love oh happy Christians so close to God oh happy people who have so beloved a saviour so great a saviour you know what happens when let us say some relation of yours comes to visit perhaps you have a relation in

[29 : 29] Australia or New Zealand or America and once in every twenty years or something they may come and you may not have seen them in all those years and when they come they bring their children with them and the first thing you do is you embrace the children oh my dearest child I never saw your face before are you the daughter are you the son of my brother or my cousin how welcome you are they are beloved for the father's sake so are Christians in the beloved god the father embraces them all angels in heaven are rejoicing to know that you are in Jesus Christ and God and God will keep back nothing good from those who are in his beloved because they are accepted that is to say they are legally accepted the law cannot condemn them the devil cannot overwhelm them the world cannot ultimately seduce them sin itself ultimately cannot be against them because if God before us who can be against us if Christ died and rose again who shall separate us from his love so he goes on in verse 7 concerning Christ in whom we have redemption through his blood the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of his grace wherein he has abounded toward us in all

wisdom and prudence in christ then what do we have well he begins this at verse 7 redemption now that word means to purchase back or to buy back we were under the power of the devil we were under the power of sin and the ransom or the redemption is the buying back of the people of god from their bondage and their slavery and their being restored to their rightful ownership who is god the father so my friends this is the comfort through the work of our blessed saviour we are brought back to the god from whom we revolted in the beginning of history no longer are we under the power of darkness but we are translated into the kingdom of his dear son and oh the cost of our redemption verse 7 redemption how redemption by what means by his blood now that's only one word blood but in that one word is the whole suffering of the son of god here is the lord's table again if you like pointing to the same thing the cost the price required to bring you and me back out of our state of damnation is the price which is incalculably great of god's own son his sufferings vicarious his atoning work his propitiatory agonies becoming sin for us and the curse for us and the consequence in verse 7 is this the forgiveness of sins oh what a comfort they can scoff at us if they like they can call us old fashioned if they like and they do the newspapers ridicule us they won't give us time or space on radio television or in their glossy magazines or in their daily smutty newspapers we don't get any space or time to say what we'd like to say to the world from these media but scoff at us as they may my friends we've got something they know nothing of poor things the forgiveness of sins oh thank god it is a thanksgiving morning

I say thank god for the forgiveness of sins I don't know how men live do you without the forgiveness of sins when people walk about bearing their own burden you can see it written all over their faces there's no happiness in the world you watch the faces of men and women walking up and down the street you can tell it the way they dress the way they live the way they do everything about their bodies they're not at peace they have no rest they are under a conscious state of condemning conscience their conscience is telling them they are alienated from god whether they'll tell you or me or not they are guilty or you might say I'm going too far surely they don't know that well don't they it doesn't take very much you know some judgment or other and at once the unconverted is terrified and he will say it's like the end of the world you see man is still man there is still something of the image of god left and man at his worst still knows something about god the word god means something to the worst and most depraved of men so does the word sin so does the word conscience so does the word guilt god has put eternity in man and our conscience makes cowards of us all ever until we come into this blessed condition of having redemption through his blood I'll tell you a verse that I love in the gospel of john if the son shall make you free then are ye free indeed my friends let us rest on that verse we are made free according to the riches of his grace now he has a different phrase here in verse 6 he had the glory of his grace now he varies it in verse 7 the riches of his grace you see he can't find enough language to express it he's overwhelmed with the magnitude of its riches glories excellences he's running out of superlatives the dictionary isn't big enough he'll have to increase the vocabulary of any language he uses because God's grace is greater than all words to express it wherein he has abounded toward it in all wisdom and prudence what does that mean it means that God has in his goodness not simply done great things for us and in us but here's the meaning of verse 8 but

God has explained it all to us in the Bible this verse 8 refers to the Bible the wisdom and prudence made known to us according to the mystery of his will verse 9 all of that's a reference to the Bible it's the holy Bible God has not only saved us and brought us into this position of being his sons not only has he chosen us in Christ not only has he prepared us for the glory but wonder of wonders he has given me a book and in this book I read all about it here is the latest news here is the most up to date information in the world here is tomorrow's newspaper this book it is a revelation of the will and the glory of God his promise his madness and riches of love to all sinners oh but wait a minute I apologise for being enthusiastic I should have forgotten I almost forgot we're living in an age of course when the bible is out of date

I apologise to you my enthusiasm ran away with me we should be throwing away our bible shouldn't we because we're not to believe this anymore the world would be a happier place would it not without a bible so they tell us oh what a tragedy our generation is our forefathers were going to heaven through this old book and now people are going to hell sadly without it ah but don't let it influence you my beloved don't let it have the slightest effect on your mind whether they scoff at the bible or whether they try with their so called science to deny its teachings you and I know it is the wisdom of god and the prudence of god he is abounded towards us in making known to us the

mystery of his will here in this book from genesis to revelation it is all his mysterious purpose made known in the revelation to his own dear children according to his good pleasure which he has purposed in himself that in the dispensation of the fullness of time he might gather together in one all things in christ both which are in heaven and which are on earth even in him now verse 10 is one of these verses again that goes right to the end of time he is referring to the unfolding of the ages the word dispensation really is economy that is to say god breaks up history into pieces god is a god of order we know this because every week has seven days it doesn't have eight days one month and then six the next or three the next every week from the beginning to the end has seven days god is a god of order he breaks history into pieces so that we can understand it and the first dispensation is what we call the old testament from adam to christ the old testament dispensation ah but now we are in a new dispensation the new testament age doesn't matter how you break them up you can break them into subdivisions if you wish from adam to moises and moises to christ and so on it doesn't matter how you break them however you look at history and the process of time he means that when we come to the unfolding of it all the fullness of the times when we come to the second coming of christ here's what's going to happen god the father's going to gather all things together in christ things in heaven and things in earth that is to say those who have died in the faith and those who are still living on earth when christ comes things in heaven and things then on earth and all the new heavens and the new earth will be under christ and he will be the lord of all even the angels will attribute their perseverance at the beginning of history to christ and his divine power enabling them to withstand the temptation with which the devil and his angels fell so my beloved the savior you love is to be lord of all in the end now there are other things here and i will be tempted to go on but i must stop you see what is being said in this great chapter and in this great sentence in the end of it all christ will be all and that's good news for you and me because it means that a little longer a little more patience and

[41 : 06] history will have come to its great full stop it's not got there yet but it's hurrying on and we go through bad times at the moment there are discouragements and the church generally is low and weak but we mustn't look to things that are seen but to things that are unseen and we must be constantly thankful to god for all that he has done we mustn't be time bound after all we're not in time as the world is we're in these heavenly places and we're looking down and we take a grand sweep of all that god is doing my friends if the apostle paul looked in his own circumstances he would never have written this chapter what would he have written about had he been looking at earthly things well he would have said do you people at Ephesus know that for your sake i'm in prison do you know how painful these chains are on my wrists do you realise

I had a bad night last night I couldn't sleep because I had these rough soldiers on either side giving me a nudge and waking me up do you realise there's a noisy place in this prison where I am you have no idea you should be praying for me and you should be praying how harder for me you don't realise i'm an apostle no he doesn't say any of that he lays himself and his earthly things aside he forgets everything in this world and he sees the magnitude and the immensity like a great searchlight or like one of these huge astronomical telescopes he's not looking at earthly things he's gazing at the stars and the luminaries and the purposes above life and all of this he says is so that we should be to the praise of the glory of his grace no wonder then my dearly beloved no wonder he says at the end and at the beginning rather blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ oh blessed father oh blessed out