

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 18, 2018**

TOP TEN REASONS TO PRAISE GOD: PART 4

Ephesians 1:7-14

In many churches, the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church is observed during the month of November. Some churches observed it two weeks ago, some last Sunday, and others are observing it today. While every Sunday can and should be a day of prayer for persecuted Christians around the world, and the prayer page in our church bulletin includes a prayer request every week for Christians facing persecution, it is good to highlight the plight of Christians suffering for their faith on a special day designated for that purpose. So, let me share with you a top ten list of the worst kind this morning. This is a list of the top ten countries in the world where it is most dangerous to follow Jesus. The list comes from Open Doors USA, an organization that tracks the persecution of Christians around the world. According to Open Doors, some 215 million Christians today experience high, very high, or extreme levels of persecution. Which means that 1 in 12 Christians in the world live where Christianity is illegal, forbidden, or punished.

Here, according to the Open Doors World Watch List, is the 2018 ranking of the top ten (maybe we should say “worst ten”) countries where Christians are persecuted for their faith:

1. North Korea (for the 16th year in a row)
2. Afghanistan (which is so bad it almost knocked North Korea out of the top spot)
3. Somalia
4. Sudan
5. Pakistan
6. Eritrea
7. Libya
8. Iraq
9. Yemen
10. Iran

With the exception of North Korea and Eritrea, these are all predominantly Muslim countries. According to Open Doors, “Islamic extremism remains the global, dominant driver of persecution, responsible for initiating oppression and conflict in 35 of the [top] 50 countries on the list.”

Though it is “only” #5 on the list, Pakistan is the country where persecution against Christians is the most violent. In acts of violence against Christians, attacks on churches, abductions, and forced marriages, Pakistan ranks first (meaning *worst*) on the World Watch List. (Source: Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, www.christianitytoday.com, January 10, 2018)

You may know the story of Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman who spent eight years on death row in Pakistan after being convicted of blasphemy against the prophet Mohammed by a Pakistani court in 2010.

Her ordeal began in June 2009, when she was harvesting berries in a field with a group of women. She stopped to take a drink of water with an old metal cup she had found lying next to a well. One of her neighbors saw her and angrily told her it was forbidden for her, as a Christian, to drink from the same cup Muslims use to drink, and that some of the other workers considered her to be unclean because she was a Christian. When they made derogatory statements about Christianity and demanded that she convert to Islam, Asia responded: “I’m not going to convert. I believe in my religion and in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for the sins of mankind. What did your Prophet Mohammed ever do to save mankind?” An argument, as you can imagine, ensued.

A mob later came to her house, beating her and members of her family before the police came and took her away. She was subsequently arrested and charged with blasphemy under Pakistani law. In November 2010, she was found guilty and sentenced to death.

Less than three weeks ago, the Supreme Court of Pakistan overturned her conviction – which is an answer to many prayers. But neither Asia nor her family are safe. Since her conviction was overturned, Pakistan has been rocked by violent protests from Islamists calling for her to be beheaded and for the country’s top judges to be killed. Asia is now being held in protective custody in an undisclosed, secure location somewhere in Pakistan. While Asia and her family want to leave Pakistan and seek asylum elsewhere, so far she remains in limbo. Apparently several western countries have talked with Pakistan about giving asylum to Asia and her family, but no deal has been made yet. Evidently there is fear of a backlash from Muslim extremists against any country giving her asylum.

In the meantime, while Asia is supposedly under protective custody, life for the 2.5 million professing Christians in Pakistan has become even more difficult because of the bloodthirsty anger of Muslim radicals over the acquittal of Asia.

Much of the world is not a safe place to be a Christian. There is never a time when it is not time to pray for our Christian brothers and sisters enduring hardships and outright persecution for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

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Let’s return now to Paul’s top ten reasons to praise God. Repetition is a valuable tool when you’re trying to learn and to remember what you have learned. So let me remind you of the first seven of Paul’s top ten reasons to praise God.

Reason #1: We praise God because He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (1:3). Every spiritual blessing you will ever need is yours in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reason #2: We praise God because, in His free and sovereign grace, He chose us before the foundation of the world to be the objects of His saving love and “to be holy and blameless in His sight,” set apart by Him and for Him to serve His kingdom purposes in this world (1:4).

Reason #3: We praise God because, in His great love, He predestined us to be adopted as His children through faith in His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ (1:4-5). Add to this the fact that adopting us and making us part of His spiritual family gave God enormous pleasure (1:5). Think about that: It gave – it *gives* – God pleasure to make you His child and to include you in His family. He has a special place in His heart for you.

Reason #4: We praise God because He redeemed us from our captivity to sin through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross for us (1:7).

Reason #5: We praise God because He forgave our sins – every last one of them (1:7). Not because we deserve it. Not because we have earned it. He did it because He loves us. It is as simple as that.

Reason #6: We praise God because He lavished His grace on us with all wisdom and understanding (1:7-8). There is nothing skimpy about God’s grace. It is lavish. It abounds with immeasurable abundance. It is always sufficient. No matter what. His grace is more than enough and always will be.

Reason #7: We praise God because He has made known to us the mystery of His will in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The mystery of God’s plan to save a lost, broken, rebellious world has been revealed in the coming, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and what it all means for us. The mystery – once hidden but now revealed to the world – is the gospel itself, which, as Paul writes in Romans 1, “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (1:16).

The mystery now unveiled also includes God’s intention to renew and restore all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We joyfully affirm this in the EPC Essentials of our Faith, which says: “Jesus Christ will come again to the earth physically, visibly, and bodily – to judge the living and the dead, and to consummate history and the eternal plan of God.” Jesus has come. And Jesus will come again.

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On to Reason #8.

REASON #8:

We praise God because He has given us an eternal inheritance in Christ. In the NIV, verse 11 says: “In Him” – in Christ – “we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will.” The word for “predestined” is the same word used in verse 5, which speaks of our being “predestined ... to be adopted” as His sons and daughters through Jesus Christ.” But a more literal translation of the first part of verse 11 would be: “In Him we have obtained [or gained] an inheritance” or “In Him we were made heirs.” This inheritance, says Church Swindoll, is “an eternal, irrevocable inheritance grounded in (God’s) sovereign choice and predestined according to

His will” (*Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Galatians and Ephesians*, 170).

An alternative understanding of this verse suggests that Paul is not speaking here of *our* eternal inheritance in Christ, but of believers – of the church – as *God’s* inheritance. Whether it is what Paul means here is debatable, but it is nonetheless true: God has claimed us – you and me and all true believers throughout all of history – as *His* inheritance for all eternity. For all eternity He desires us to be with Him. The Westminster Shorter Catechism states that “the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” To glorify *and* enjoy. I wonder, though: Did it ever occur to you that God desires to enjoy *us* forever as His beloved, adopted, redeemed, renewed, restored, and (ultimately) glorified people? He does. And He will.

The main meaning of this verse, I think, is that God has promised and will provide an inheritance for us in His eternal kingdom. Peter speaks of this inheritance in 1 Peter 1:3-4, where he says: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” (Exactly the same way Paul begins Ephesians 1:3.) “In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.” People perish. Unless Jesus comes back first, you will perish someday. So will everyone you love. It is a fact of life. It is good to be prepared for it. Beloved pets perish. Dreams perish. Nations perish. Food spoils. Colors fade. Beauty fades. But the spiritual inheritance you have in Christ will never perish. It will never die. It will never spoil. It will never decay. It will never fade. It will never be superseded by anything or anyone. It will remain valid and in force forever.

Why? Because it is from God Himself, “who does not change like shifting shadows,” as it says in James 1:17. As Paul says in another context in Romans 11:29: “The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.”

A change in relationship or other circumstances could alter some earthly inheritance you hope to receive or to leave behind. But the inheritance of life eternal and the never-ending joys of being with God that He has promised to provide for all who believe in His Son Jesus Christ, for all who trust in Him and love Him and follow Him and serve Him, will never be taken away. It is yours for all eternity, if you belong to Christ by faith.

REASON #9:

We praise God because, when we believed in Christ, He put the seal of the Holy Spirit on us. He gave us the Holy Spirit as a mark or seal of His ownership and of our new identity in Him.

The verb “to seal” (*sphragizo* in Greek) means “to mark as secure.” In Bible times, a seal was a sign of ownership or authenticity. A king or other ruler would put a seal on a document to show it was official. (See Esther 3:12; 8:8, 10, for example). The stone over the entrance to the lion’s den into which Daniel was thrown for disobeying the law against praying to anyone except the king, was sealed with the king’s ring along with the rings of his nobles, as the stamp of the king’s authority (Daniel 6:17). So, too, the tomb where Jesus was laid after His crucifixion was, the Jewish leaders hoped, made secure by putting a seal on the stone over the

entrance to the tomb (Matthew 27:66). But neither the stone with its seal nor the Roman guard at the tomb were enough to prevent Jesus from “busting out” on Easter morning!

Paul uses the word “seal” in reference to the gift of the Holy Spirit in the lives of ordinary Christians like us. What he says in 2 Corinthians 1 is strikingly similar to what he says here in Ephesians 1. In 2 Corinthians 1:20-22 he writes:

“No matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through Him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (1:20-22).

He speaks of the Holy Spirit as a seal again in Ephesians 4:30, where he issues this warning: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

The Holy Spirit is the seal given to you to verify and certify that you belong to God. The Holy Spirit is God’s identifying mark in your life to show that you are His child. Let that encourage your heart when your faith is tested or when you have to deal with the ordinary and sometimes not-so-ordinary difficulties of life.

REASON #10:

We praise God because the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of the inheritance He has promised us in Christ. Verse 14 says that the Holy Spirit “is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession” – meaning you and me and all who trust in Christ – “to the praise of His glory.”

The word “deposit” in Greek is *arrabon*, which can also be translated as “pledge” or “down payment.” The Spirit is a down payment, a first installment from God Himself, with the promise – the guarantee – of the full inheritance still to come.

When you buy a house, you make a down payment as a good faith sign of your intention to complete the purchase. Sometimes people default on their promise to pay what they owe. Not every sale or purchase of a home has a happy ending. But when God makes a down payment on a promise – when God gives the Holy Spirit as the first installment of the eternal inheritance He has promised to His people – you can be absolutely sure that He will never default or renege on His promise.

You might also think of the Holy Spirit as a kind of engagement ring, which is one way the word *arrabona* is used in modern Greek. An engagement ring is a promise of something yet to come – as we ordinarily think of it, a promise of marriage and of the exclusive love and fidelity inherent in the meaning of marriage.

Not every engagement leads to marriage. Which is not necessarily a bad thing. If you become engaged to the wrong person, it is far better to come to that realization before you get

married than to discover it only after you are married. To break off an engagement, or to have your fiancé(e) break off your engagement, can be very painful, even if it proves to be in your best interests in the long run. An engagement ring is not a guarantee of “happily ever after.”

However, when God gives to His children the Holy Spirit, which is really the gift of Himself, since the Holy Spirit is fully God, the third Person of the Trinity, He will never break off His “engagement” to us. The gift of the Holy Spirit is God’s guarantee of our future inheritance, the guarantee of the fullness of our salvation in the life to come. In the words of one author, the Holy Spirit is “a foretaste in the present of the fuller inheritance of our redemption” still to come (Maxie Dunnam, *The Communicator’s Commentary: Galatians to Colossians and Philemon*, 155).

As Chuck Swindoll has written: “We have the Spirit now, and He convicts us (John 16:8), (encourages) us (Acts 9:31), strengthens us to experience (the power of) Christ’s ... presence (Ephesians 3:16), and assures us that we are God’s children (Romans 8:16).” All this, however, is just “a sneak preview” of what awaits us in the fullness of God’s kingdom when we see our God and Savior face to face (Swindoll, 171-172).

The Holy Spirit is the iron-clad guarantee of the eternal inheritance God has promised us in Jesus Christ. What more could we ask for?

Does Paul’s top ten exhaust all the reasons there are to praise God? Of course not. If you need a little help, though, this top ten list is a good place to start. And when you even begin to comprehend what God has done for us – what God has done for *you* – the only thing that makes sense is to lift your heart and voice in thanks and praise to God, and to give your life, to commit your life, to surrender your life to Him forever as your way of saying thanks to Him.

Will you do that? Have you done that? Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.