

What would you do if tomorrow you found out that you had inherited an unexpected fortune? What problems would it solve for you? What problems would it create? How would a surprise inheritance affect your life?

There was a wealthy bachelor from Portugal named Luis Carlos de Noronha Cabral da Camara. By our standards, that's a long name. Luis had inherited a large amount of money which he spent on motorcycles, shooting, and drinking. The rest he wasted, as the old joke goes.

Being a bachelor, he didn't have anyone to leave his fortune to, so he picked the names of 70 random strangers from a Portuguese phone book and left them a share in his estate. After his premature death at age 42, many of his heirs thought they were being scammed when they received their unexpected inheritance.

Can you imagine how this unexpected windfall affected their lives? We hope his heirs spent their wealth more wisely than did Luis.

Even more amazed was a journalism student in Moldova named Sergey Sudev, who received a surprise inheritance totaling around \$1 billion dollars from an uncle he hadn't seen in a decade. Yes, that's billion with a B. The inheritance made him one of the wealthiest citizens in one of the poorest countries in Europe. **Such surprises unfortunately do not happen to many people in this world, but every once in a while, . . .**

I read about a company that specializes in locating missing heirs so they can claim their inheritance. Heir Hunters International employs teams of researchers to find people who have an inheritance waiting for them. The company claims that they have "handled cases totaling well over \$100 million." This is a huge amount of money, but it's still just a small percentage of the \$47.1 billion dollars' worth of unclaimed inheritances worldwide, according to *The New York Times*.

It's hard to imagine that there could be that much wealth waiting around to be claimed by its rightful heirs. What a difference it would make in their lives if they knew that they had such riches waiting for them.

That's the message the Apostle Paul is trying to share with us today. God has abundant gifts He is waiting to give to His children. The Apostle Paul tells us that we are greatly blessed. He writes, ***"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."*** Note those words ***"every spiritual blessing."*** God is love. Love is generous. So, by His very nature, God is abundantly generous. He doesn't hold back any spiritual blessing from His children. The power, the authority, the hope, the joy, the peace, the love of God is all available to God's children. So why do so many Christians struggle with anxiety, envy, greed, fear, and hopelessness? **Could it be because we don't understand the truth and the value of the spiritual blessings we've been given?**

Rev. Ian Brown tells a story of an old miser who buried all his gold in a hole in the ground. Once a week, the miser dug up the gold and stared at it. He savored it. He dreamed of what he would do with it. And then he put the gold back into the hole and covered it up again.

One day a thief dug his gold up and stole it. When the miser came to look at his treasure, all he saw was an empty hole. He began to howl with grief and his neighbors came to see what the matter was. One of the neighbors asked, "Did you ever use any of the gold?" "No," he said. "I only dug it up once a week to look at it." "Well then," said the neighbor, "for all the good it did you, you may as well come every week and gaze at the hole."

That seems like a silly story until we realize that living in ignorance of our spiritual blessings is as useful as burying a bag of gold in the ground and never using it. **WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE OUR BLESSINGS...to thank God for them, and claim these blessings as the foundation of our lives.** That is the key to living without anxiety, fear, poor self-image, envy, greed and hopelessness.

First of all, we are blessed because WE HAVE BEEN CHOSEN! Paul writes to the Ephesians, reminding them God has blessed them "with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world."

The words “in Christ” appears ten times in the book of Ephesians. Paul wants us to realize that Jesus did the work for us. We don’t have to earn it. We don’t have to be “good enough” to deserve it. Out of his love for us, Jesus sacrificed his own life to guarantee us all the spiritual blessings that flow from his relationship with God. So, when we read that “in Christ” we become children of God, it means that our identity and inheritance are sealed by the sacrificial, unconditional love of Jesus. As Paul put it, God “destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.”

So, what does it mean that we are chosen in Christ? If you are chosen, that means you are valued. You are loved. It means that God has a purpose for you. You don’t choose a painting unless you plan to display it and enjoy it. You don’t choose a pet unless you plan to nurture and protect it. You don’t choose a spouse unless you plan to cherish and love that person. Now consider that God chose you and destined you for adoption as His child before the creation of the world. Once we understand this truth, how can we doubt God’s love for us or God’s plans for us?

In November 1984, a young man named Patrick was doing his laundry in the dormitory laundry room at San Francisco State University. It was late at night, and Patrick was spooked by a sound coming from a cardboard box in the corner of the room. He walked over and peeked inside and found a baby! It was a newborn baby girl, abandoned in the dorm laundry room. The baby’s body temperature was dropping, and she was turning blue. Patrick grabbed the first student he saw, a nursing student named Esther Raiger, and asked for her help. Providentially, Raiger had just completed a course in infant care. She cared for the baby until paramedics arrived.

The hospital staff named the newborn Baby Jane Doe. When the story hit the news outlets, numerous people around the country offered to adopt her. Among those who contacted Child Services were Sam and Helene Sobol. Helene says that the moment she saw Baby Jane’s picture in the papers, she said to herself, “This is our baby.” The Sobols adopted her and changed her name to Jillian. They never hid the fact that she was adopted, but they didn’t tell her the circumstances of her birth until she turned sixteen. They were concerned that Jillian might be upset at her abandonment. But when Jillian recalls the conversation, she remembers the overwhelming feelings of being “special and loved.” It didn’t matter to her how her life started out. All that mattered was that she had been chosen and adopted. That’s what defined her life.

More than 20 years later, Jillian Sobol entered San Francisco State University where she had been abandoned—this time as a student. She graduated in 2015 with a degree in Hospitality and Tourism Management.

In God’s great realm there are no grandchildren, no stepchildren, there are no illegitimate children, because each of us is a child of God “in Christ”! We are set free. We are chosen. Let that be a truth that defines you. There is great joy in a feeling of “being chosen.” **YES, we are blessed because we are chosen.**

We are blessed in the second place, when we realize that our “SINS ARE FORGIVEN!!” To encourage the Ephesians Paul wrote, *“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us.”* The wrongs we have done often are a primary source of our feelings of failure and unworthiness. In Christ, however, we are forgiven and given another chance.

Someone wrote into *Reader’s Digest* to tell of a problem their mother was having. A medical billing service had just bought an 800 number that was identical to her mother’s number. Her mother began getting dozens of calls every day from people wanting to discuss their bills from this medical billing service. She got fed up with the calls, as you can imagine, so she called the medical billing service and asked them to change their number. They responded that she should change her number, even though she’d had the same phone number for 20 years. So, the woman said, “Fine. From now on I’m going to tell everyone who calls that their bill is paid in full.” The medical billing company got a new number the next day.

Do you understand the freedom and joy that comes from hearing that your debts have been paid in full? All your failures and imperfections and battles deep down in your soul that separate you from God—all those have been wiped away. **You are a new creation in Christ** (II Corinthians 5: 17).

The Apostle Paul serves as a powerful example of the joy and freedom found in forgiveness. Paul wrote, *“For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am . . .”* (I Cor. 15:9-10) Even though Paul once persecuted the church,

through the grace of God he was forgiven and given another chance. With his new life, Paul set forth proclaiming the message of salvation to Jews and Gentiles alike.

Let me tell you about a businessman named Richard Mangone. Richard spent 18 years in prison for bank fraud. He had used his position as president of a Massachusetts credit union to obtain fraudulent loans, which he used to invest in real estate. His illegal scheme made him millions of dollars and let him indulge in a lavish lifestyle. But he felt empty on the inside. When he was finally arrested for his crimes, Richard skipped his trial, abandoned his wife and family, and went on the run. He ended up on the U.S. Marshals' Most Wanted list. He spent a year on the run, moving from town to town. He brought enough cash with him to ensure that he could still live the high life on the road. He drank and partied and picked up various girlfriends. And he was more miserable than ever. So, he made plans to kill himself. On the night before his suicide attempt, Richard was flipping through the TV channels when he came across a television evangelist preaching about Jesus on the cross. Richard says, ***“Placing my hands on the TV set and crying, I asked Jesus to forgive me for all my sins and receive me as his child. It sounds like a cliché, but I felt a great weight lifting from my shoulders.”***

Richard eventually gave himself up to authorities and entered the federal penitentiary. The prison chaplain began mentoring Richard, and he began studying the Bible, then teaching Bible classes to fellow inmates. In 2013, he was released from prison. Today, Richard Mangone is a volunteer counselor to men in state and federal prisons. He is also the founder of Bezael Prison Ministries, an organization that helps former prisoners re-adjust to civilian life.

Sometimes the hardest person to forgive is ourselves. But true freedom and new life are possible if we give our lives to Jesus Christ. In him, we are SET FREE. In him, we ARE FORGIVEN.

And finally, we are blessed when we realize that we are not “TRAPPED” BY WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO US IN THE PAST. Many of us get stuck because we remember and relive old, painful memories.

There's an old story about a man who ran into a friend one day. He said, “Say, you look depressed. What are you thinking about?” **“MY FUTURE.”** was the quick answer. **“What makes your future look so hopeless?”** Just as quickly, he replied, **“MY PAST.”**

If this Bible passage is true, then it is God who defines us, not our successes or failures, or our strengths and our weaknesses. **God alone defines our life.** And when God looks at us, He doesn't look at our past. He looks at our possibilities. He looks at our potential. He looks at who we could be once we find our life in Christ.

In his teens, a young man named Eddie Elguera was at the top of the skateboarding world. In fact, Eddie created many of the innovative skateboard tricks that are now standards of the sport. He was named national champion by the U.S. Amateur Skateboarding Association. On the professional circuit, Eddie won the Gold Cup Series, making him the undisputed world champion of skateboarding. But one day his life made a wrong turn. He became heavily involved in alcohol and drugs. It was not long before Eddie wrecked his skateboarding career. In no time this young man who had grown accustomed to fame and money was scraping by with a job at his family's Mexican restaurant. It was then an elderly woman came in and engaged Eddie in conversation. Her name was May Hubolt. Eddie told May of his once-lustrous career, and his disastrous slide into drugs. May knew what Eddie was searching for. **She began telling him about Jesus. That day, Eddie and his mother and his brother all gave their lives to Christ.** Today, Eddie Elguera serves as a youth pastor in California. **A wrong turn does not mean our lives are over.**

For some of us, last year was the worst year ever. Many people lost jobs; many were laid off. Many found themselves having to cope with less income and more stress. Others experienced death in their families which left them hurting and grieving.

Here's what Christ says to us, regardless of our circumstances. New beginnings are possible. In fact, this very time is a time of NEW BEGINNING. You may have spent your life living in anxiety and envy and disappointment. You may have let your family, your culture or your past define you. **God wants you to know you have nothing to fear.** **WHY? BECAUSE YOU HAVE BEEN CHOSEN.** You have been forgiven! You are no longer trapped by what has happened to you in the past. **You are, of all peoples, BLESSED.**

Let this be the day that you find your identity, your purpose, and your future in Christ. Amen.