

Building Biblical
COMMUNITY in CHRIST

Grace and Peace to You!
Ephesians 1:1-2

Introduction

In the late 1960's and early 70's, as the drug culture was born in America, I had the opportunity to do some evangelistic work among pushers and addicts on the streets of Memphis, Tennessee. Hallucinatory drugs were particularly popular at that time and were often referred to as "mind expanding" in their effects.

When we come to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we could apply the same description – "mind expanding" – but obviously without the undesired addictive effects (Though this book can be habit forming!).

Paul's letter to the Ephesians was John Calvin's favorite letter and it is certainly mine. One commentator, Armitage Robinson, calls it "the crown of St. Paul's writings."ⁱ

John McKay, who for many years was the President of Princeton University, wrote this:

I can never forget that the reading of this...letter...exercised a more decisive influence upon my thought and imagination than ... any piece of literature...The Christ who was and is became the passion of my life. ...As a result of that encounter I have been unable to think of my own life or the life of mankind or the life of the cosmos apart from Jesus Christ. He came to me and challenged me...I responded. The years that have followed have been but a footnote to that encounter.ⁱⁱ

That too was my experience as I began to study this book seriously some thirty years ago and have taught it repeatedly since then. And that also is my prayer for each one of us as we move through the truth of this epistle which is truly "mind expanding." May the Christ who was and is become the passion of our lives.

Let's begin by reading together Paul's words in Ephesians 1:1-2 –

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Eph 1:1-2

Whenever we begin a study like this we need to ask some basic questions. This morning I would like to ask three questions which find their answers in these two verses.

WHO WROTE THIS LETTER?

This is the first question we ask when we get a letter. However, we have a rather strange way of signing our letters. Unless there is a complete name and return address on the front, a person normally has to read the entire letter and get to the end before knowing who the author is. I remember one of the first letters I received from Mary Alice after we had been dating for only a month. She had just gone home for Christmas and I was waiting somewhat impatiently to see whether or not I would hear from her. Finally, that letter came. At least, I assumed it was from her. I thought I recognized the handwriting. But do you think she opened her letter by saying: "Hi David, this is Mary Alice the girl you've been dating since November!" No, I had to go immediately to the end of the letter to verify that it was indeed Mary Alice. And when I read those words, "Love, Mary Alice" I knew that something was going down.

However, in Biblical times, things were more practical. In typical fashion, Paul identifies himself as the author of this letter and he does so right up front. Though Paul's name only appears twice in this epistle (1:1; 3:1), first person pronouns referring to Paul are used 23 times.ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul first visited Ephesus at the end of his second missionary journey as recorded in Acts 18:18-22. In Acts 19 he visits again and we're told that the gospel goes out from Ephesus to all of Asia. And finally, in Acts 20, Paul visits with the elders of the Ephesian church as he makes his way back to Jerusalem on his third missionary journey. I would encourage you to this week read these three chapters in Acts which give the historical background to this letter.

Without a doubt, in about the year AD 64 Paul pens this letter from his imprisonment in Rome, as he did three other letters: Philippians,

Colossians, and Philemon (cf. 3:1; 4:1). He then sends it with Tychicus (cf. Acts 20:4) who was probably accompanied by Onesimus, the converted fugitive slave that Paul sent back to his master (cf. Philemon 1:10-12). And so Paul writes in chapter 6, verse 21:

Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you. Eph 6:21-22

Before moving on, however, notice how Paul describes himself – “*an apostle of Christ Jesus.*” An apostle is literally a “sent one,” an official representative of someone else. Paul belonged to Christ and was sent by Christ, and as such he was Christ’s “apostle.”

While I was in Seoul, Korea last month, following my son Jonathan’s death, I had the chance to meet Mr. Tom Meredith, the consulate of the American Embassy. In his role, he is an official representative of the United States to South Korea. When I arrived in Korea, I knew immediately that I was in a different culture with a different language and different customs which – to a large degree – were foreign to me. But stepping into the Embassy and meeting this official U.S. representative, was like stepping back into America. Why? Because the embassy with its representatives are “sent ones” of the United States.

In a similar way, Paul is a “sent one” belonging to Jesus Christ. When people saw and met Paul, they to a certain degree saw and met Christ. The same should be true of you and me. When people see and meet you, do they see and meet Christ? Though we are not “apostles” in the sense that Paul and the twelve were, we are nevertheless “sent ones” belonging to Christ. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so send I you” (John 20:21).

TO WHOM WAS IT WRITTEN?

Another important question is this: To whom was this letter written? Paul continues: “*To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.*”

First, Paul describes his readers as “saints.” Now in our day and age, this word has come a long way from its biblical meaning. Today the word “saint” makes us think of an austere figure crystallized in stain glass or of someone long dead but now officially declared an ecclesiastical relic.

But that is not at all what the Bible means by the word “saint.” Paul is referring to all believers, regardless of where they are in their Christian pilgrimage. The word simply means “set apart.” The word was used in ancient Greece to describe those who were “devoted to the gods.” If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are a “saint,” one who is “set apart” to God. A “saint” is not some elite category of Christian who has “arrived” in the Christian life. You don’t become a saint by being canonized by the church, but by being *in* the Jesus Christ.

One of the great nineteenth-century preachers was a Scottish Presbyterian, Alexander Whyte. He served a congregation that dearly loved him for nearly forty years. One day a lovely lady came to him and said, "Dr. Whyte, I just love being in your presence. You are so saintly." Alexander Whyte looked at her with great seriousness and said, "Madam, if you could look into my soul, what you would see would make you spit in my face."^{iv} Someone put it this way, “A saint is a dead sinner revised and edited.”^v

Secondly, Paul describes the Ephesians – and you and me – as the “faithful” in Christ Jesus. Paul does not seem to be referring here to a separate category of believer, i.e. those who have demonstrated themselves to be faithful in the Christian life. The word is probably best translated “those who have faith.” Those “set apart unto God” and those “who have faith” are one and the same, referring generally to believers.

But thirdly, these saints (believers) are “in Ephesus.” If you’re following in the New International Version, you’ll notice a small footnote which says that some early manuscripts do not have the word “Ephesus” in verse 1. I personally, believe, however that the evidence points to its inclusion in the text. Though originally a small Greek colony, Ephesus by this time was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. In light of this, it is quite probable that Paul wrote to the church in this city intending the letter to then be circulated among the other cities of the province, including the twelve churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3.^{vi}

Lastly, Paul describes his readers as being “in Christ Jesus.” One has said that this word “in” is the biggest, little word in the whole book.^{vii} The word can be compared to a very small key that can open a huge door that leads into an expansive room or building. The phrase “in Christ” or its equivalent

“in him” or “in whom” is that small key to understanding the entire letter. It appears more than 90 times in the letter and 14 times in chapter one alone. We’ll see as we move through this letter that this phrase “in Christ” defines for us our position, our privileges, our possessions and our practice.

But did you notice this? These believers are both in Ephesus and in Christ. In effect, they have two homes. And so do we. We reside “in Portland.” But our real identity is “in Christ.” We need to keep in mind this balance. Some believers think being “in Christ” means to completely withdraw from the world. Others focus so much on the “in Ephesus” (or “in Portland”) that they forget their real identity and citizenship in Christ and in heaven.

WHAT IS THE MESSAGE?

The last question we want to answer this morning is this: What is the message of this letter? Paul already hints at this in his introductory words found in verse 2 –

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

This letter is all about *grace*. If someone were to ask me what the Bible is all about, I would say: the Bible tells us how a holy God can take sinful people like you and me, clean us up and bring us into His own perfect heaven without fouling up heaven and without losing His own righteousness. And that, my friend, is grace. Grace is God’s unmerited favor, God’s love in action. Grace is God giving you and me what we don’t deserve. Grace is the face God wears when he looks at my failures.

What is that face? It’s the face of *favor*. When the angel appeared to Mary, the mother of Jesus in Luke 1:28 he said, “Greetings, you who are highly *favored*.” That is the word “grace.” Because of the work of Jesus Christ, you and I live under friendly skies. We live under God’s favor. That is the “face” God wears when he looks at you and me and all those who are “in Christ.”

This favor of God – His grace – is *selective*. This is what we’ll discover next week as we look at verses 3-6 of chapter 1. It is poured out upon and experienced by those who are chosen “in Christ.”

God's grace is that which *saves* us. Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2:8 – "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*"

More than this, the grace of God equips you and me for service. In Ephesians 4:7 Paul says, "*But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.*" He then goes on to speak of the important role that each of us has in ministering to others within the Body of Christ.

The grace that saves us and equips us for service is the same grace that sustains us in our daily lives. Elsewhere Paul speaks of what he calls his "thorn in the flesh," most likely some type of physical illness (2 Cor. 12:7-9). Three times he asked the Lord to heal him of this, and each time God simply replied, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*"

Whatever your burden today (and maybe you feel very weak as Paul did), one thing I am sure of – God's grace is able to see you through. Paul knew this grace which sustains. After all, he is writing this letter from Roman imprisonment. And yet his sense of well-being and contentment was not dependent on his circumstances, but on God's grace.

These are just a few of the angles of God's grace. Apparently, you and I will be discovering more and more about the riches of God's grace throughout eternity. Notice what Paul says in Ephesians 2:7 –

In order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

Not only is Ephesians a message of grace; it is also a message of *peace*. And in that order. For you see, God's grace leads us to God's peace. And God's peace flows out of God's grace. This letter speaks not so much of peace *with* God (vertically) or the peace *of* God (inwardly), but rather emphasizes the peace *with others* (horizontally) that is ours in Christ. The word is used eight times in this letter, six of which clearly speak of peace in relational terms (2:14, 15, 17; 4:3; 6:15).

And this brings us to the overall theme of this letter. One of the common mistakes made in reading and studying certain parts of this letter is to interpret what Paul says from an individualistic perspective. We certainly do this because we are so influenced by our culture. But when we take off our

cultural lens and study each part of the letter in light of the overall context, we see the degree to which Paul is who we are and how we are to live as a new community in Christ.^{viii}

*Building Biblical
Community in Christ*
Ephesians

		CALLING			CONDUCT			CONFLICT			
		<i>To Spiritual Blessings</i>	<i>By Reconciliation</i>	<i>According to God's Purpose</i>	<i>In Unity</i>	<i>In Newness</i>	<i>In Submission</i>	<i>In Warfare</i>			
Introduction	Conclusion			Paraphrase: Paul's Testimony							
1:1	1:3	1:15	2:1	3:1	3:2	3:14	4:1	4:17	5:21	6:10	6:21
		"Know" 1:18	"Remember" 2:11	"Don't lose heart" 3:13		"Walk worthy" 4:1		"Put on" 6:11			
Our Heritage Together in Christ						➔	Our Life Together in Christ				
"I pray that you may know your resources in Christ."						"I pray that you may live consistently with your identity."					

And that is what we have entitled this series: *Building Biblical Community in Christ*. In chapters 1-3 Paul is addressing our calling in Christ. We are called *to spiritual blessings* (chapter 1), *by reconciliation* (chapter 2), and all of this *according to God's purpose* (chapter 3). In these first three chapters Paul is speaking of our *heritage* in Christ and he prays that we may know all that we have and are in Christ. One has said: "The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches, but to reveal to him his own."^{ix} That is what Paul does here in these first three chapters. He reveals to us the unfathomable wealth that we have in Jesus.

But when we come to Ephesians 4:1, there is a major change of focus. It's found in the key word "therefore" (4:1). Paul here moves from our calling in Christ to our conduct in Christ. In chapters 1-3 the emphasis is on you and I in Christ. Now in chapters 4-6 Paul shifts to Christ in us and the implications of that for our daily lives.

There is a third and final section of this letter where Paul moves from the calling and conduct of the church to our conflict in spiritual battle. That is found in 6:10-20. Throughout these final three chapters Paul's prayer is that you and I might live consistent with our identity in Christ.

It is interesting that as Paul begins this epistle with a greeting of grace and peace, so he ends this letter with the same.

Peace to the brothers, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love. Ephesians 6:23-24

My prayer is that we will grow together this year in this indescribable peace and grace which are ours in Christ.

ⁱ J. Armitage Robinson, *Commentary on Ephesians, Exposition of the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1979), preface.

ⁱⁱ Illustration Card Library of Dallas Theological Seminary edited by Michael P. Green, 1982.

ⁱⁱⁱ This fact was never questioned until the beginning of the 19th century with the rise of liberal New Testament criticism in Germany.

^{iv} Gordon MacDonald, "Repentance," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 121.

^v Ambrose Bierce, clipped from the Illustration Card Library of Dallas Theological Seminary edited by Michael P. Green, 1982.

^{vi} It's also clear that this was not the first letter written to the Ephesian believers and the surrounding churches (cf. Eph 3:2-4; Col. 4:16).

^{vii} Ruth Paxson, *The Wealth, Walk and Warfare of the Christian* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1939), p 28.

^{viii} "One of our chief evangelical blind spots has been to overlook the central importance of the church. We tend to proclaim individual salvation without moving on to the saved community...our message is more good news of a new life than of a new society." He goes on to add, "Nobody can emerge from a careful reading of Paul's letter to the Ephesians with a privatized gospel." John R.W. Stott, *God's New Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 9.

^{ix} Benjamin Disraeli, 19th century British prime minister. Quote submitted by Marshall Shelley, Wheaton, Illinois.