



ephesians

a church becoming

Sunday, September 8, 2024

Ephesians 1:1-2

If we were to look at the life of Paul, and follow his journeys, we would see that since his conversion he travelled countless miles, spreading the truth of Jesus Christ. During his travels, he connected with the churches and people, and ended up writing 13 books of the New Testament. The books that Paul wrote are considered to be epistles. These are basically letters that he wrote of encouragement and challenge, and even correction to the various churches in the cities that he had ministered to.

Now, when it comes to his letter to the church in Ephesus, entitled the book of Ephesians, this book is well regarded as special and unique because unlike his other letters, in his opening welcome there is no one person or group of people being specifically addressed here. It simply reads as follows:

Ephesians 1:1-2

*'Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God,
To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus:
2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'*

The idea is that although he sent this letter to the Christians 'in Ephesus,' the contents of the letter are actually meant for the entirety of the 'faithful in Christ Jesus.' Or as Paul refers to them - 'the saints.' And so when reading this book, we can actually read it with the understanding that what Paul is saying here is not just specific to the context of the churches in the first century but also to the church of today.

It is also helpful to understand Paul's connection to Ephesus. Of all of the regions and cities that Paul visited - and there were a lot - he had a special connection with Ephesus. It was here that he spent the most time, approximately three years during his third missionary journey. 3 years may not seem like a lot of time but when you factor in the constant movement of Paul's ministry, his usual pattern of brief visits to various cities, and the danger he faced in many of these places causing him to leave quickly, his extended stay in Ephesus stands out. And what it did was allow Paul to connect

with the Ephesians at a deeper level than any of his other destinations. This deep connection can be seen woven throughout his letter to the Ephesians, where Paul speaks with a very pastoral tone, emphasizing the aspects of unity, love, and spiritual growth and maturity that he was hoping to instill in them.

And keep in mind - he wrote this letter while stuck in prison in Rome. In fact, it was during this time that Paul actually wrote four of his most influential epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Collectively known as the 'Prison Epistles,' what stands out amongst these four letters is that each share a strong element of the kind of hope that we have as Christians. That even in the midst of seasons of adversity, there is profound purpose and strength and, yes, even joy for those who trust in Jesus.

And so this is the lens that Paul writes this letter through. He is sitting in prison, has all the time in the world, is realizing more and more that he may not in fact, get another opportunity to see these people again so he writes to them urging them to:

Grasp: the depths of God's love

Grasp: the richness of their spiritual blessings

Grasp: the power that is available to them through Christ.

To personally know the depth of God's love in their lives, and to know that they are so incredibly blessed and to know that they are empowered by His Spirit.

And it's important to understand that this was not new information for the Ephesians. It was information that they had already received and learned, but Paul was giving them a reminder. And even in his brief 2-verse opening we can see clear elements of this:

Ephesians 1:1-2

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

He reminds them that they are saints or in other translations, holy ones: which is the Greek word, 'hagios' and simply means, 'set-apart ones.' Not perfect ones - for no one is perfect but God Himself. But through Christ Jesus, He has made us holy. Paul reminds the Ephesians right from the start of the letter that the Holy God has grabbed a hold of them and set them apart for His redemptive purposes in the world. They are called to Himself with purpose. And although they live in

Ephesus, Paul makes it clear that they are actually in Christ. That no matter where they go, they are in Christ. He is their home. And He alone is the one who can offer Grace and Peace. Paul uses these two terms next.

Grace - a gift which they could never earn, the unmerited favour of God, extended freely through Christ's sacrifice - all because of His great love.

Peace - the wholeness and inner rest that comes only from being saved by His grace.

Paul underscores that through Christ, they have been given everything they need: grace to sustain them and peace to guard their hearts, no matter what they face in life.

So why does Paul feel the necessity to remind them of these things? Because Ephesus was a really, really tough place to be a Christian. During the three years that Paul was there, he saw a lot of opposition and spiritual conflict. Ephesus was a major centre for pagan worship, particularly the worship of the goddess Diana, and it was also a hub of magical practices and idolatry. The pressure to conform to the surrounding culture was intense. But it wasn't just the pagan culture that was providing opposition. The Jews in that area were staunch believers that Jesus Christ was a false Messiah and therefore the Christian church in Ephesus to be completely heretic. So the church of Ephesus needed to be diligent in order to press against the societal and religious pressures of their day.

And this day-to-day spiritual battle can easily wear someone down if they aren't careful.

So this is why Paul in his opening, reminds them that they are set apart with purpose, that the great grace of God has been applied to their lives, and that the peace that they experience from having this great assurance should actually be on the forefront of their minds as it acts as a great motivator to continue to do what needs to be done.

You see, it can be so easy to fall into the trap of going through the motions and just doing the day-to-day things and dotting the I's and crossing the T's that this kingdom living can just become routine.

So what I think Paul is doing here is genius - it seems to me that this whole opening section - and we'll get to the nitty-gritty next week - is meant to remind them of the beauty of their salvation, and the majesty of their Saviour - Jesus Christ so when they face the pressures and challenges of living in a city like Ephesus, they are anchored in who they truly are. Paul knows that if they can

grasp the depth of their identity and the greatness of their Savior, they will be equipped to withstand temptation, persevere through trials, and continue living boldly for Christ in a hostile world. And that comes through relationship not routine. Don't get me wrong, there are a whole list of do's and don'ts that Paul will get to, but what he is setting up here is that first and foremost they need to stay close to Jesus.

That they must not lose their first love.

And this won't be the first time that they hear this message either. Approximately 30 years later Jesus Christ, Himself will speak that exact phrase over the church in Ephesus in the Book of Revelation as yet another reminder of how easy it can be to get lost in the work of the Lord and lose sight of the Lord of our work.

Listen to what Jesus says:

Revelation 2:2-3 (MSG)

'I see what you've done, your hard, hard work, your refusal to quit. I know you can't stomach evil, that you weed out apostolic pretenders. I know your persistence, your courage in my cause, that you never wear out.'

I mean, who wouldn't want to be affirmed like that!! I'm a dutch-guy and that hard work ethic is just part of my nature and words like that are incredibly affirming to me. Until the 'But.....'

Revelation 2:4 (MSG)

4-5 "But you walked away from your first love—why? What's going on with you, anyway?"

You see, somehow in the midst of all of their hard work and effort and doing, they had a lost sight of why they were even doing this in the first place. It had just become simple routine - they were going through the motions. And Jesus reminds them that it doesn't have to be that way.

****Show video****

Share story of driving through Austrian Alps and having the locals right on my heels and passing at the first opportunity. I was so in awe of the beauty and splendour of the mountains, but these guys had lost sight of the beauty.

Sometimes we can get so accustomed to living for Christ that we forget that we are called to live in Christ.

For me, this is what it all comes down to. Paul is desperately trying to remind the church that we are to be in Christ. That we cannot abandon our first love - because it is through this relationship where we gain our strength. This is where we gain our hope. This is where we gain our peace.

Because it is only through His presence that we can truly grasp the power of the grace and peace and beauty and splendour that Jesus offers. The Ephesians were in danger of growing accustomed to just doing, doing, doing. It had become simple muscle memory and Paul was calling them back to rediscovery. The rediscovery of all the glory and splendour that Jesus is. To never forget the beauty of their salvation. What He pulled them out of. What he saved them from. To live in Christ.

Don't abandon your first love.

Josh Hageman

Lead Pastor

Kingsview Community Church

Stoney Creek, ON

www.kingsviewchurch.com

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