

Sunday 30th September 2018
Ephesians 1 .1-2
Is this an introduction, or the whole in a nutshell?

To undertake a series of sermons or essays on the Book of Ephesians is a daunting exercise. Ephesians is amongst Paul's loftiest writings. Where Romans moves step by step unveiling the geography of salvation in Christ, Ephesians soars in heavenly realms and gives a glimpse of salvation as seen from the heavenly places. Ephesians, over the years has been a favorite subject of Puritan writers and great preachers. Martyn Lloyd-Jones sermons on the book run to eight volumes, while Thomas Goodwin fills 824 pages in his exposition of chapters 1 and up to chapter 2 verse 10. William Gurnall's *The Christian in Complete Armour* runs to 1189 pages, and that is only looking at the later part of Ephesians chapter 6. Needless to say, even if our journey through the book takes a while, I will barely begin to do this book justice!

Many others have written more briefly using one or more of the themes which repeat themselves in the text, and these may be helps to some. Watchman Nee's little book entitled, 'Sit. Walk, Stand,' gives a suggestion of some of the themes in Ephesians, while another book entitled, 'You could be Rich,' deals with spiritual riches as proffered in Ephesians and not a 'get rich quick' theme which is so popular today – money that is!

With this in mind, let us begin. May I recommend that you have a Bible open beside you, and that at some time when at leisure, you read the whole Epistle through. Resolve to do this on a regular basis, and little by little, the text will begin to open up. If we were to desire to get a solid, readable presentation of the book of Ephesians, we could hardly do better than the volumes of Martyn Lloyd-jones. These can be bought for a few pounds or a few pence on Kindle, I think.

Ephesians has a structure common to all of Paul's longer letters. Paul always begins with truth, doctrine, theology, and never a 'how to' or a 'what to do.' Essentially the outlook of the Bible is that life is spiritual at its core, and theological because all of life comes and revolves about God. Theology and doctrine is the way we deal with the knowledge of God which has been given to us. God reveals Himself in what He says and does, and this is gathered together in the Scriptures.

Truth, doctrine and theology must be taken seriously. We may get away with assembling a flat pack wardrobe without due attention to the book of instructions, but we will not be able to live without the book that is the revelation of God! If you doubt this, I ask you, would you be willing to entrust yourself into the hands of a surgeon who told you that he had never consulted Gray's Anatomy, but just cut and looked to see what happened. Surgery is much more complicated than putting together a self-assembly wardrobe, and life is more complicated than surgery!

You may say to me that many people live very successful lives without any reference to God or the Bible. That appears to be true, but depends on your definition of success. That is the reason the world is as it is. The successful people we know of, are they

successful in this life only, but what of the next life, what of eternal life, have they gained much of the world and lost their souls? They may have excelled in one aspect of life, but not the whole of life, which includes the now and the eternal!

God reveals His nature and His Person in what He says, does and promises. From these we learn what God requires of us, and how He accomplishes this in us. He does this supremely in Christ, and the Book of Ephesians is written as if Paul is looking down from heavenly places, so the vision of God and the purposes of God as shown in this Book are majestic and lofty.

There are themes which repeat again and again like a great symphony with themes that repeat, but with each repetition new elements are added which take it to new heights. It is like some of those hills we have climbed, which when we reached what we thought was the summit, stretched upwards again and again as new heights were opened to our view.

For example, grace is a major theme. The Epistle begins with grace v2, and then just as we are beginning to think that we are getting to grips with its reality, we come across v6 where Paul presents us with a new element to grace, where he speaks of glorious grace. No sooner has Paul landed that on us, but v7 where we encounter the riches of God's grace. However, the newness is not finished yet, because he now tells us v8, that this glorious grace, these riches of grace are not just given, but are lavished upon us. Think of the prodigal son. Luke 15.v15ff. He came back to the father asking to become a slave so that he would not starve. Did he get this? No, he did not! He received the restoration of his person into the family, into the inheritance of the father, he was given a robe and shoes and a ring and the fatted calf, the meal of an honoured and valued guest is served and a party is given. That is a bit different than applying for a job as a skivvy! This parable shows us at a human level what riches of grace lavished on the wretched boy looks like! God is greater, infinitely, eternally and boundlessly greater than that noble father in the parable.

There are other themes that we will encounter which are carried to heights, as grace is. Ephesians being written from an elevated view, qualifies all of these themes in terms which can only be said to describe them each as Eternal, Infinite Absolute and Boundless. To speak of grace again, Ephesians describes God's grace as infinite grace, eternal grace, absolute and boundless grace. Such a brief conjunction of words will take all our lives to fathom, and even then we will be floundering in knee deep water while there are the soundless depths to fathom through eternity! Other themes which are so described are God's Sovereignty, Grace, Love, Power, Glory, Mystery and Riches.

Ephesians shows us the delight that the Father has in honouring the Son and giving Him the highest honour in the heavenlies. How strange it is that we see the Son exalted and glorified by the Father, and yet on earth He is ignored and His Name is used as a swear word! Christ is displayed as the ruler of all, as all powerful, active in the affairs of the world, and the savior of all who will be saved.

This is good news, given the condition of the world and of mankind. Christ is displayed as all powerful over all the forces that act against us, our fears and sinfulness, over death and hell. We are told of the majestic work that God has accomplished through Christ for our salvation. We are told from what Christ has saved us. We are given the diagnosis of the human condition, fallen, sinful, dead in sin, and without God or hope in the world. This is the reason we are as we are, we all are seeking respite from fate, circumstances and death without any hope or success. But now we are shown that God has acted in grace on our behalf, so that in Christ the hope we can have is beyond measure! You see, to understand what is amazing about grace, we need to have an understanding of our natural condition of being dead to God, otherwise grace will only be a word, and not something that fills us with joy. In other words, if we do not think our condition is terminal, we will not like the medicine offered.

Chapter two of Ephesians gives the most penetrating diagnosis of the deadly consequences of sin for which chapter one gives us the medicine. To delve into the condition of mankind in sin is not morbid, it is necessary. To deny that there is an avalanche heading towards us will never turn it away, nor will it cause us to take appropriate action, that is to run from it and take shelter! If we walk on thin ice, it is no good pretending that it will not break, we need to get off the ice as soon as possible. So many people live as if nothing will ever happen to them, but very often it does. Hence, we need to take seriously both our condition and God's solution, to do this is not morbid, it is the most rational thing in the world. We are not naughty people, we are evil people and dead. God is not a polisher of tarnished materials, salvation is not like respraying the paintwork of an old car. He is the restorer to life and the raiser from the dead, the maker is also the remaker.

In Ephesians we are presented with truth to chew on, and chew we must. None of us, I hope, cuts a lump of food from our plate and swallows it whole without chewing it and getting the flavors of it. It is the same with truth, it only yields its life giving virtue when acted on by the Holy Spirit, and that takes time and thought and enlightened reason. It is not about being clever or a great intellect, but encountering The Truth which is Christ in the truth of the Word.

We are to chew over the word and receive it by faith. One of the great weaknesses and errors of the present generation is that we are self-obsessed. We seem to bring everything down to how it affects me and makes me feel. When we read the passage in Luke about the cost of true discipleship, this notion that following Christ will not cut across our wills and emotions is shot to pieces. Ephesians is firstly a letter to disciples teaching them what it means to walk more faithfully as disciples, so there are hard and difficult things to face as we go through the book. We so often equate emotionalism with faith, and this is not safe. Faith has Christ, who He is, what He has done, and what He promises as its focus, not how we feel or how we want to feel. Most of us want to get out of the flame before the gold is smelted. Most of us want to get off the wheel as soon as we feel the pressure of the potter's fingers. The result is that we are not purified or shaped, that is made holy, and this is also a chief theme of Ephesians. The Bible says much about submitting to the dealings of God, and even asking for God's dealings.

There is also given insight into the ultimate goal of God for us in this life and into eternal life. We are to become holy, loving and faithful, that is having faith, and show this by our obedience to God's ways, a universal, not partial obedience. This will cause us to live in such a way that God is glorified by our lives and living, because ultimately what matters is the glory of God, and not our happiness in this life! However, if we pursue holiness, we will also become happy!

If we live by our feelings and measure it by our happiness, the inevitable result is that we will forever be at the mercy of circumstances. We will be victims to all the ups and downs of life. The alternative that Paul presents in another place is to learn contentment in every circumstance, and enjoy the peace of God that is beyond understanding. We have probably all heard or read stories of people who went through things that are almost too much for us to contemplate, but did so in peace and even with joy. Read or reread the life of Joni, or Corrie Ten Boom.

Let us now turn briefly to the first two verses of the Epistle.

These two verses are Paul's greeting to the recipients of the letter. The greeting is similar to many other of his greetings and was the customary way of beginning a letter in New Testament days. However we should not hurry past it as if there is nothing of interest or use to us in it.

V1.

It begins with a statement of Paul's identity. Paul is an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. He has not taken this role upon himself, but God has called him to this relationship and work. Paul could have said that he was a former extreme Pharisee, a hater and enemy of Christ, a persecutor of the Church and murderer of God's people, but he does not see himself in this way. In other places he owns his past, but that is the point, it is the past! It is imperative that we come to know and see who we are in Christ, to shed our old identity because we now see that when God regenerates us, He actually makes us new! This does not mean for a moment that we forget from where we have been redeemed. Often as not a sign of spiritual growth is that we see our past with greater shame and self-abhorrence, but with a deepening amazement and gratitude at the grace of God which has been extended to us. A diamond, our new life, is best displayed on a black background, the ever clearer view of our sinfulness and corruption brought about by our increasing view of the beauty of God's holiness.

I do wish I had read some of the old masters in my youth more carefully. However, I was not fit to profit deeply from them in the distant past, but now, they are a joy! If you are young, start to lean to read serious and godly literature. It is hard work at first, but pays dividends!

Paul also does not see his identity in terms of his present gifts and standing. Christ and His call is his identity. If we were more like this, knowing something of who we are and

what we are called to be in Christ, it would transform our spiritual and emotional health. Do you remember the parable of the Prodigal? The elder brother was livid that his father had rolled out the red carpet for the waster of a son. He complained that he had worked without complaint for his father, and that he had never even been given a calf with his friends. The father replies that everything the father had was his, and he could have taken of it at any time he wanted! In other words, don't be envious or angry with God over another person's call and position in the Body, especially if you are not using the grace already granted to us.

What are the graces available to every believer? We will get to them eventually, but they are every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Lavish grace is ours as believers, but we must use it and improve it, not ignore it and be jealous and angry over what we see God do for others. If we are not using the grace given, it will decay in our hearts which will harden and become calloused. I suppose many of us can think of people or family we have known who once appeared to us as almost saints, but now they do not name Christ's Name, or even go further and speak against the one they once said they loved. Do you remember a certain sportsman turned TV commentator? What ever happened to him? Possible he stopped acting on grace, so cooled, solidified, and we cannot say any more than that.

We are told a lot about the believers in Ephesus.

Firstly, they are saints. That does not mean that they are anywhere near perfect, but God has chosen them and set them apart for Himself, set apart to be holy unto Him, set apart for His use and service. They are set apart to become holy through and through by the grace of the Father, and the Son, and it is implied, this is mediated by the Holy Spirit, so all the members of the Trinity are acting together in this work of sanctification, or holy-fying.

Secondly, they are faithful, they are a people of faith, and a people who are consistently acting on faith. This is not an on/off thing depending on how they feel and how their circumstances pan out. They live in faith, looking to Jesus, depending on His work, and not being distracted by other voices. 'When all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay – on Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.

Thirdly, they are in Christ. This means that they have a union with Christ. It is called the Mystical Union. Images like the vine and Olive shoots grafted onto the Olive tree, and living stones being built into a living temple, are all pictures of this spiritual union with Christ. Because of this union, we have the Holy Spirit in us, and by this means, Christ becomes a fountain of life in us, and to us, a fountain of perfect, infinite, eternal, boundless life!

V2.

The Father and the Son offer believers two things. These are mediated by the Holy Spirit, so even though the Holy Spirit is not mentioned at this point, God always acts in unity in Trinity. Grace and peace are offered, as secured through the work of the Cross

of Christ. If we ever get away from the Cross, we are on the wrong path, everything is from the Father, through Christ and given by the Holy Spirit.

The two greatest needs of mankind are grace and peace, so in a sense, this verse 2 is the whole of salvation in a nutshell, hence why we cannot skip over it as if it was just the 'Dear Fred', of an ordinary letter.

Grace and mercy are essentially the same thing. 'As mercy is God's goodness confronting human misery and guilt, so grace is His goodness directed toward human debt and demerit.' A. W. Tozer 'Knowledge of the Holy' Chapter 9 paragraph 3. Tozer says it best!

Grace is God's infinite, eternal, and boundless disposition towards us of love, mercy compassion and kindness, and this to undeserving, fallen, sinful wretches. By His grace, God has freely acted to procure and to extend forgiveness. God is not under any obligation to be gracious to us, neither is it our pitiful condition which moves Him to act. Grace arises wholly from God's own nature. This is important, because then there is nothing that we are or can which will affect God's graciousness. There is no sin too great, no state too hardened, no condition so wretched, but God's grace is greater. All of us, and our actions and our sin are finite. God's grace, since it arises from His nature, is infinite, eternal, boundless, and so free. It is by grace that we are saved, it is by grace we are chosen, justified, sanctified and then glorified, this is all of God.

Peace. Through the Cross, firstly God makes peace with humanity, who are His enemies by nature. When peace is extended to us, we can have peace with God, then peace with ourselves, then peace with others, including our enemies and those who have spitefully used us. This peace from God is what gives the lie to the victim mentality so common today. We want to see out miseries as the fault of someone or something else. This means that we become bound in a mindset that manifests itself in which people are able to continue to upset us and continue to abuse us. It is as we enter God's peace that we can take responsibility for our part in things, and be freed from the effects that others have had on us. This peace is described as peace which passes understanding. There are many examples for us to consider in the Bible. A very strong example of this peace is the account of the stoning of Stephen. Acts 7 verse 54 to the end of the chapter tells his story. Do you agree that Stephen, even while being stoned to death was in a different place, on a different level than his killers? Some of the Martyrs called out from the flames that they felt no pain. I can hardly imagine that, but it sounds like peace that goes above and beyond our reason, a supernatural peace. This is the peace that is on offer here. It is a peace that transcends our circumstances and feelings.

This peace arises in us by the Holy Spirit working in us when we are regenerate, born again. We have the seed of life born in us, we are born from above, and eternal life is now at work in us. This means that even if our bodies and mortal life is utterly obliterated, as so many were when the Twin Towers collapsed, we lose nothing.

In Ephesians, we are being taught how to live with our feet on earth, but our hearts and minds in heavenly places, to experience the first fruits of eternal life now, and to look forward to and to live with our minds set on eternal things. This is holiness of heart and life now, living to the praise of God's glory, and then fullness of life and glory with Christ forever. The first steps on this journey are to learn and grow in our identity as Christians, and to make much of grace and peace.