

Sunday 7th. October 2018
Ephesians 1 v 3-14

Winston Churchill once quipped, 'It would be a great reform in politics if wisdom could be made to spread as rapidly as folly.' Replace politics with religion, and this also holds true. O how wonderful it would be if wisdom spread as rapidly as folly! Jesus once commented that the Pharisees strained out gnats and swallowed camels. When we come to the book of Ephesians we are confronted with some of the most concentrated wisdom ever written, and yet so many of us spend our energy on incidentals. One of the things that I have noticed with some of these celebration cakes, which are so popular, is, that they are constructed and decorated with such splendor, and yet often contain a most ordinary or poor quality of cake! What a swizz! Therefore, we need to look at this material slowly, chew it, taste it, enjoy it, digest it and be nourished by it. Truth is compared to meat, which takes us time to digest. Scriptural truth that will build up our souls takes time to chew and be digested!

Last time I was emphasizing the importance of Grace and Peace. These are the two mercies from God that humanity most needs, and they are only found in God. We fool ourselves if we think these are ever found in us, or anywhere else. Our present day culture is so self-obsessed that we do everything to tell ourselves that we are a special people, that we are wonderful, that we are self-made and self-sufficient! We are not. A loss of job, a serious illness, a rebellious child, a strained marriage, pain in our bodies or minds, soon lets us know that we are not the source of our own life, and barely hold it together even on a good day.

When we read the Bible, we are shown that all grace and peace resides in God alone, but such is the nature of God's grace, that He desires to lavish it upon us. Failing to recognize things like general providence, that God causes the wicked man's crops to grow just as well as the righteous man's, causes us to think that we are the reason for all goodness, not God. We end up being our own little tin pot gods declaring what is good and what is evil as it suits us.

In Ephesians chapter 1 and verses 3 to 14 Paul writes a passage where almost every word could be mined for treasures, and he seems almost breathless as he pours out layer after layer of profound truth in rapturous praise. However there are two concepts which are basic to the understanding of Christianity, and without these set in the foundations of our faith, we will soon go astray and be subject to the pounding of every wave of hardship and trouble that comes upon us. We will complain that God is unfair, and that life is unfair.

The two matters we must look at first are these.

Firstly. What is the ultimate goal or end that God has for His creation?

Secondly. What is the purpose of this brief and for many, a troubled mortal existence?

These are important questions. I suppose we have all heard people in films, and some of the celebrities talk about going off somewhere or attaching themselves to some leader or sage with the goal of 'finding themselves.' Others, often great thinkers and philosophers, have almost driven themselves mad in trying to fathom if existence has any meaning. The answers that they came up with have had far reaching consequences, but that is all written about elsewhere. In these verses a great deal is said about ultimate things. Are we up for the challenge to handle and be confronted by God's truths? No need to go seeking to 'find ourselves.' The thing is to have God find us, and us therefore to find God. In having God, it answers all these big questions. The answers becomes more and more convincing the more we grow in God.

Firstly What is the ultimate goal or end that God has for His creation?

This will sound strange to many ears, but God's ultimate purpose is not our happiness or wellbeing as we often think of it. Read the Scriptures, and it is most often God's choicest saints who suffer the most. Think of the long time Abraham and Sarah waited for the promised son! Think of the young man Joseph, of Job, of Daniel, and Jesus, Stephen and the trials and hardships of Paul. Hebrews 11 tells of others who suffered, and unlike those just mentioned, did not see the recompense for their sufferings in this life. The rich man and Lazarus is an account of such a life. However, none of them were ultimately losers, but gainers!

God's purpose for us and creation is expressed in Ephesians 1 and verses, 6, 10, 12, 14. We exist to give and bring glory to God. You see, while we hold a high view of humanity, and a low view of God, we will go wrong. God does not exist for us, but we for Him. God made us, not we Him, yet we often fabricate a view of God in our heads and hearts which puts us in the center and not God. When we seek to comfort ourselves with notions that God will let us into heaven because we have tried our best, or been nice, or been a minister, elder or church member whether faithful and regular or not, we are making a God in the image of our emotions! The only reason that anyone will go to heaven, minister, elder or whatever is because of faith in Jesus as our Saviour.

Luke 17 tells the story of a servant who waits on the master before attending to his own meal, and even such service is nothing more than his duty, not anything of merit. We exist because of God, He is our creator, we are not His creator!

God is not just a man exalted to the 'n.th' degree of perfection. He is God, not a bigger version of us. He is the unbeginning end, the infinite, eternal, boundless one, the God of love, faithfulness, truth and grace. We are flesh, of short duration, and full of sin even beyond our finding out. Nothing we do is pure, everything we do has corruption and death in it. There is no comparison between God and us, other than the interest God has taken in us.

This being so, who should serve who, who should praise who, who should have the first place, God or us? God sits at the top of the top table. He is served first and then

mystery of mysteries, He invites us to sit with Him and eat. He sits, He invites, we do not invite or help ourselves. It is clear who the Master is, Ephesians reminds us of this.

We are created to live in a way that brings glory to God, both in time and in eternity. God first, God only, and all else comes far after this. There are so many passages that speak of this exclusive duty towards God. Luke 17 also has such a passage. It speaks about gaining and losing our lives. The essence of the meaning is that those who lose their lives, literally, but much more in terms of laying aside what the world offers as life, will not become boring and sad, but will gain eternal life, in part now, and then fully above. You will have read this before, 'What does a man profit if he gains the whole world but loses his soul!' A day may come when one man owns everything in the world, but it has not happened yet, so Jesus is making a great statement. Even in the unlikely event that someone arose to own everything and everyone in the world, he would be a pauper if he lost his soul. We cannot put a price on a soul, not even the world is enough! Our main concern in this life must be the glory of God, and how we do this, and not our glory and what makes us look or feel splendid.

In the end, all that there will be is God and His new Creation. This world will all be gone, and a perfect new world will be rolled out by God. We can either invest in this world, or the next. We can either invest in 'squarials' and Beta Max, slide rules and other things that didn't last, or in heavenly things which do last.

However, even though there is the story of the servant who says that at best he is an unworthy servant, yet the astonishing thing about God and His grace, is that He does reward His servants in this life and more so in the next. Do you remember what Jesus said about giving a cup of cold water to someone? He said that they would not go without reward. Then there are the Beatitudes, for every blessedness of humility, there is a blessing of fullness. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' God is so gracious that He gives rewards even when the best that we can do is but our duty. This is all of grace, of God's goodness and kindness, it in no sense implies that God owes us anything.

The other aspect of living to the praise of God's glory, living in the light of the fact that God is moving to that point in time when Christ will be visibly exalted above all, is that in calling us to live in such a way, God will let us into the pleasures and joys which are of His nature.

I don't know what all that will be, but the list includes things like this. In Eternity, and these promises are only true for believers, we will be freed from any desires, lusts or seductions to sin. The old will no longer be or feel old, the young who have had their lives cut short by wars or disease, will know fullness of life, no more tears, sorrow, grief, partings, temptations failure, faithlessness or fear. Don't you long for that, and best of all, the uninterrupted presence and face of Christ! God does not call us to universal obedience and devotion to spoil our lives, but to make them. The old hymn talks about solid joys and lasting treasures, this is what God desires us to have a share in.

What is the alternative? It is the way of the world, the rat race, the competition, the back-biting, the sin, moral failure, aging, aches and pains, and then everything we had ever built being squandered by our children, or being out in skips and dumped! We take nothing with us into eternity except our immortal souls, so let's focus on that!

The Westminster Catechism, says it well. Question 1. What is the chief end of man? Answer. The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for-ever. God is the goal, His glory is the reason for our existence, and that is the highest of all callings!

The reason that we find it hard to take up our own cross, to lay down our lives, to forgive those who trespass against us, to live for God, no matter what it seems to cost us now, is because we don't believe and have not tasted of the things to come, so are not convinced that this is really the best way for us to go. Francis Thompson the poet has a telling line in his poem 'The Hound of Heaven,' where he says he fled from God because he feared, 'lest having Him, I must have naught beside.' He thought becoming a Christian would be all loss and no gain. He thought that grace and peace were hollow blessings, but then found them to be more solid than anything else. We have the sort of wit and wisdom of someone who said we should, 'Trust in God and keep our powder dry.' In some circumstances this is a statement of faith – perhaps in the trenches or on the front line, but not as a way of life. We are probably not venturing all on God when we only start seeking Him once we have all our barns full and all our bases covered!

Secondly. What is the purpose of this brief and troubled mortal existence?

Again, if we read the papers or listen to the experts, it is all expressed in terms of what we think is good for us. We view life as being all about what we can get out of this earthly existence. This is all that unbelievers can know. Chapter 2 tells us about the condition, the utter hopeless condition, of people who are not believers, who have not tasted and experienced God's grace and peace, and we will come to this in due course.

People have 'bucket lists,' and people in the media, tell us that we have to visit here or there, or do this or that before we die. Some people live for the weekend or the two weeks holiday in the summer, or for a sport or a hobby. Guess what, the Bible does not include any of these things in the 'must do before you die' list! What it does say is that before we die, we must get the 'Born Again' experience, we must get the 'holiness' experience. This is both an experience in the true sense and also a life to live forward.

The Bible does not teach us that the world was made to be our play-ground, but rather a battle ground. It tells us that in the beginning it was made to be the suitable place for fellowship, communion, friendship and the walking together in the cool of the day with God. The world is the potter's wheel, it is the place and the time we are given to be prepared and furnished for eternity with God. It is the place where we get on the job training for eternal life. The world is a play-ground only for those who are dead and hence are care-less and know no better.

Verse 4 tells us that the purpose of this life is that we grow in holiness, that we are transformed into the likeness and image of Christ. Humanity was created at first with the image of God in it, but it was lost through sin. God is at work in any who believe to make us holy and blameless, for open love and relationship with Him. To be able to grow in this, we must be born again and then grow in holiness which will show by love and faith being evident in our lives.

How do we know if a plant has survived the winter or not? If it is alive, in due course it will bud, grow and produce flowers and fruit. If after two or three years, there has been no buds or leaves or flower or fruit, what do we conclude? We conclude that the plant is dead, even though the label on it says 'Beautiful Rose.' Ephesians will give us many sure ways of examining ourselves to see if we are actually alive spiritually or whether we are merely professing something which is not true and so harboring a false hope.

Holiness is vitally important to faith and assurance of salvation. Holiness is the only path by which we can actually enter into a fuller experience of God's grace and peace. Holiness is grown by the Holy Spirit working in our lives. In Chapter 4 we will see how growing in holiness is a duty enjoined upon us, and in which we must engage. The Spirit has the key role, but we have things to do as well.

All these matters are important, because the quality of those who call themselves Christians has been decaying to such a point that there is often no difference in the life of believers and unbelievers, and this should not be so. This is the opposite of what it means to live to the glory of God.

These are the two ultimate goals of life as taught in Ephesians. Firstly that the ultimate purpose of God is that He be glorified, and secondly, that the purpose of God for our mortal life on earth is that we grow in holiness. That for many of us in the West, the world is also a pleasant place to do this should not distract us from the serious path of growing in holiness. It seems a strange thing to us, that people who live in what we would regard as terrible circumstances or in third world poverty, often make more progress in faith than we do. We would do well to think about that and why it is, and so adjust our priorities.

In verses 4 to 14, Paul raises many things, many blessings that God has given us, and each one of them is important to understand and taste of. One of the fruits of salvation, of standing in the grace and peace of God, is that having received so many blessings from God, that we bless Him with grateful and thankful hearts. Ingratitude and thanklessness is a sure indicator that we do not have a spiritual understanding of what God has done for us, that it has not grasped our hearts, that it may not have entered our hearts at all.

The word translated in these opening verses as bless, or praise, has the literal translation of, 'speak well of.' We speak well of God in thanks, reverence and gratitude, because He speaks well of us in Christ. When we become Christians, if someone were to ask God what He thinks of us, God would say something like what the father of the

prodigal said to the elder son. The father said 'We had to rejoice..... he was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.' More than this, if asked, God calls Christians chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, included in Christ. God speaks well of us by calling us His children, His beloved, Christ calls us darling, betrothed, bride, companion.

All this is glorious, but will only become heart-warming and real to us as we learn and digest these truths. We have been made rich in Christ, but unless we apply ourselves and co-operate with the Holy Spirit, we will live like paupers, even when all these blessings are what the Father has made available to us in Christ. If you were to look at Luke 15 v 31, this is the reply that the father gave to the older son who complained about the prodigal having the red carpet rolled out for him. The father tells the older son that all he had in his home was open to him, and that he could have had a feast as often as he liked, but he did not know this because he did not know the father.

Unless we grow in our knowledge of the Father, we also may live in a poverty mentality, not enjoying the grace and peace of the Father's home. Therefore, we are to believe and so become Christians, and then give ourselves to God's purpose for His creation, His Glory, and give ourselves to His purpose for our mortal lives, to become holy. The evidence that this is happening will be the evidencing of faith and love in us towards God and expressed in thanksgiving and blessing God, and love towards our fellow man.