

Series: Ephesians: Message #1

Title: “God’s Plan for God’s People”

Text: Ephesians 1:1-2

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Paul’s letter to the Ephesians begins with a brief greeting. Though his words may seem like the typical attachment to the beginning of a first century epistle, they are much more. Paul designed them to communicate important theological truth. He knew his readers needed reminders concerning their relationship with God, so he strategically started his letter. His words speak of the plan God has for those who have been redeemed. Within them, we see two ideas related to God’s plan for His people.

GOD HAS A PEOPLE (v. 1).

Since the beginning of time, it has always been the Lord’s purpose to have a people for Himself. As a relational being, He desires to relate to others. Consequently, He made humanity in His image so that it might know Him and be known by Him (Genesis 1:26-27). During the Old Covenant, Israel fulfilled His purposes (Isaiah 43:6-7). Now, under the New Covenant, the church has opportunity to partake of His life (1 Peter 2:9). At the end of time, God’s designs for humankind will be fulfilled throughout eternity, as the redeemed will live and relate to Him forever and ever (Revelation 21:3).

In his opening remarks to the Ephesians, Paul hints towards this theme. He says, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will: To the faithful saints in Christ Jesus at Ephesus” (Ephesians 2:1). Through His words, he emphasizes two realities concerning the people of God.

He has given His people servants (v. 1a).

First, Paul speaks of the way in which the Lord has given servants to guide the people of God. From reading Scripture, we know this is true. Our Heavenly Father rarely worked in redemptive history without first raising up a leader. The New Testament age is no different. Paul referenced the way in which he was “an apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will.”

The title “apostle” is based on a Koine Greek word which simply referred to one who was sent by another. It was often used as a moniker for ambassadors, government representatives, or messengers. In the New Testament age, it was specially assigned to God’s choicest servants — a select group of twelve individuals who were appointed for the initial establishment of Christ’s church. Nowadays, some assume that the office of apostle is still in function. Revelation 21:14 indicates otherwise. It shows that only twelve apostles exist in the timeline of human history. Paul, not Matthias, seems to be the twelfth. The latter was chosen outside of God’s will and timing (Acts 1:15-26), and the former was accompanied by the signs and wonders of a true apostle (1 Corinthians 9:1 and 15:7-9).

Furthermore, apostles had a unique purpose and place in God’s plan. They were given for the special revelation which was meted out during the early church age (Ephesians 3:5), and they were instrumental in the initial establishment and edification of the church. Paul would elaborate on this later in his epistle, saying, “So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers,

but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:19-20).

Paul's mention of his apostolic office wasn't meant to be a theological explanation of the office. He would speak more on that topic as his letter progressed. His intent was to remind his readers of his place amongst the people of God. He was a chosen vessel for revelation and the inspiration of Scripture. He had responsibility for the upbuilding and encouragement of God's people.

The Lord gives leaders to His people for these purposes. He always has and He always will. God's people would be wise to regard their leaders in a holy and healthy way. They should recognize the place that pastors, teachers, and evangelists have in the family of God. Unless leaders prove themselves to be unworthy of leading, followers should follow (2 Timothy 3:1-7). Stubborn resistance to God's ordained means of leadership was the folly of ancient Israel. May it not be so amongst modern believers.

Paul highlighted his office in our current text by saying that he was an apostle "by God's will." The word rendered "will" refers to what God wants or desires. As he did elsewhere in the New Testament (Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Timothy 1:1; and 2 Timothy 1:1), Paul wanted to emphasize that he wasn't a leader in the church because of his own volition and ambition. He was a leader by God's appointment. He was a leader because God had ordained it, because God wanted it.

So it is with many modern preachers and church leaders. They serve not for self glory or selfish gain. They serve because of the Lord's leadership in their lives. The Holy Spirit has prompted them to lead, because God wants his leaders to serve for His purposes. Later in Ephesians, Paul will say, "And He personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12). In His sovereign wisdom, the Lord has given leaders for the purpose of motivating and maturing His people. When God's people recognize the Lord's ordained structure for the church, they will experience greater health and the powerful working of God's presence. It is for this reason that the author of Hebrews admonished his readers regarding the matter:

Remember your leaders who have spoken God's word to you. As you carefully observe the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith...Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you (Hebrews 13:7 and 17).

He has given His people a standing (v. 1b).

On top of the servants with which the Lord has blessed the church, the Lord has also given His people a special standing. This is seen in Paul's text as he addresses his readers, saying, "To the faithful saints in Christ Jesus at Ephesus." Notice the phrase "in Christ." It shows the barebones essence of what it means to be a Christian. Above all else, God's people simply stand "in" a relationship with Christ (Romans 6:3). Two Greek words within Paul's description further highlight the special status which God's people enjoy — "saints" and "faithful."

The word rendered “saints” is one which was often applied to the Holy Spirit in the New Testament (Matthew 1:18). The verb form of the word means “to cleanse.”¹ Used spiritually, it portrays the holy and righteous nature of people who have been made clean through the work of Christ. Koine Greek scholars have commented: “The term ‘saints’ means those who are cleansed by the blood of Christ and the renewal of the Holy Ghost, and thus, separate from the world and consecrated to God.”²

All believers who have trusted in Christ for salvation qualify to be saints. John Calvin has said, “No man... is a believer who is not also a saint; and, on the other hand, no man is a saint who is not a believer.”³ In light of Scripture, the Roman Catholic teaching concerning sainthood is erroneous. When contrite sinners place their faith in Christ for salvation, they become holy. Later in Ephesians, Paul used the same Greek word rendered “saints” to say, “For He chose us in Him, before the foundation of the world, to be *holy* and blameless in His sight” (Ephesians 1:4).

The second term Paul uses to describe God’s people is “faithful.” It refers to fidelity. In relation to the Christian life, it portrays one who is faithful to Christian duty, doctrine, and devotion. Paul would later apply the same term to Tychicus, a minister who had served alongside the apostle and the Ephesians (Ephesians 6:21). Its inclusion in Paul’s description of the believers at Ephesus shows that all believers should seek to be faithful. Their standing as saints should compel them to fidelity in their relationship to Christ. As John enjoined the church at Smyrna, all Christians are to “be faithful until death” (Revelation 2:10).

Paul used terminology similar to the word “saints” fourteen total times in his letter (1:1, 4, 13, 15 and 18; 2:19 and 21; 3:5, 8 and, 18; 4:12; 5:3 and 27; and 6:18). He also repeated his usage of the term rendered “faithful” (6:21). He knew God’s people at Ephesus needed to be reminded of their standing before the Lord. When God’s children aren’t sure of their relationship to God, spiritual suffering, strain, and staleness is inevitable. As a result, they must regularly remember their spiritual identity. It is for this reason that Paul opened his letter with a simple statement concerning the saints’ standing.

GOD HAS A PLAN FOR HIS PEOPLE (v. 2).

On top of possessing His own people, God has a plan for that people. He has a specially ordained experience and destiny for those who belong to Him. Paul referenced this reality in Ephesians 1:2, as he said, “Grace to you peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The apostle’s words may seem like mere inconsequential fluff belonging to the opening of a letter, but they aren’t. Their Christianized nature conveys several important theological truths. From his words, one can observe two realities about God’s plan for His people.

¹ Hodge, Charles. *Ephesians: A Geneva Series Commentary*. (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust: 1991), 3.

² Rogers Jr., Cleon L. and Cleon L. Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to The Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 434.

³ Calvin, John. *Commentaries on The Epistles of Paul to The Galatians and Ephesians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 196.

His plan involves an experience (v. 2a).

First, Paul spoke of the experience which is common to all Christians. He did this by speaking of two virtues — “grace” and “peace.” Both themes are part and parcel of the Christian life. In regard to the first, grace is “the undeserved and unmerited favor of God.”⁴ It is the generous, gift-giving disposition of God which brings salvation. Paul will later reference this fact in Ephesians:

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love that He had for us, made us alive with the Messiah even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace...For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift (Ephesians 2:4,5, and 8).

Salvation from sin and death is possible because of God’s grace, but grace doesn’t stop there. Throughout the Christian life, Christians receive more grace (James 4:8). Because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, believers obtain ongoing spiritual strength and sustenance so that they might accomplish the will and work of God. Grace isn’t just something for salvation in the hereafter; it is something for sanctification in the here-and-now. Paul would remark on this theme on multiple occasions in his letter to the Ephesians. In 2:7, he referenced the future grace which awaits believers. In 4:7, he spoke of the way in which “grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of the Messiah’s gift” so that each of us can serve faithfully within the body of Christ. In 6:24, he closed his letter with the admonition, “Grace be with all who have undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.” Grace was both the beginning and ending theme of his epistle. And so it is with the Christian life. God’s kindness is something for our everyday experience. Through our faith relationship with the Lord, He generously empowers us to do His will. We receive the encouragement and strength we need to live for Him. Charles Spurgeon was right when he famously quipped that the entire Christian life is “all of grace.”

“Peace” is the second seminal mark of the Christian experience. By using the term, Paul probably referenced the Hebrew concept of shalom peace. The virtue involved not just an absence of conflict, but an overflowing presence of joy, harmony, and abundance. One has defined it as “spiritual prosperity.”⁵ Like grace, it plays a pivotal part in regeneration, but it also has an ongoing work in sanctification. When one places faith in Jesus’ work, all hostility that previously existed between that person and God is removed. Because transgressions are forgiven, believers are acquitted of sin’s penalty and they enter into a peaceful relationship with their Creator. Paul remarked on this later in Ephesians, using terminology similar to that found in 1:1-2. He said:

But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of the Messiah. For He is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In His flesh, He made of no effect the law consisting of

⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 434.

⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 434.

commands and expressed in regulations, so that He might create in Himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace (Ephesians 2:13-15).

Peace is present in salvation, making people positionally right with God. But it also has a role in sanctification. In this sense, it has practical implications. As we walk with the Lord with an ever-present faith in the gospel, the Lord fills us with His otherworldly joy and abundance. Paul referenced this aspect of peace later in his letter. In 4:3, he made mention of the way in which the Spirit “binds us” with “peace.” In 6:15, he talked about how the gospel gives us a daily experience of peace. He closed his letter with mention of peace as well, saying, “Peace to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 6:23).

All in all, the Christian life contains a unique experience. While most humans wander in darkness, coping with life’s demands with mere human mechanisms, believers have otherworldly help. God Himself supplies them with all that they need. Where others are left to deal with pain, worry, grief, anxiety, and hurt on their own, God’s people have the promise of grace and peace! God doesn’t just have a people, he has a plan for His people.

His plan involves a relationship (v. 2b).

God’s plan also involves a relationship. This is seen in Paul’s closing remarks in verse 2 as he speaks of “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The apostle sought to remind his readers of the unique connection they had to their Creator. To do so, he referenced two relational titles.

The first (“God our Father”) depicts the deeply familial nature of the believer’s relationship with God. Because of sin, humanity naturally has no right to approach God (Genesis 3:14-24). However, God has made a family-like relationship possible through His Son. Because of Jesus’ sacrifice for sin, we can relate to the Lord as a child would to his or her father. Paul referenced this reality again in Ephesians, using the analogy of adoption — “He predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ for Himself, according to His favor and will” (Ephesians 1:5). He also said, “For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father” (Ephesians 2:18). Our fatherly relationship with God is unique to Christianity. Islam knows nothing of such intimacy with Allah. Christians serve a God who loves them as a responsible, loving father would love his children. Jesus intimated at this profound truth when He taught His disciples to begin each prayer by saying, “Our Father which art in Heaven...” (Matthew 6:9).

The second title (“the Lord Jesus Christ”) was designed to portray the divine nature of Jesus. Paul wanted to be crystal clear that he believed Jesus to be God. The word “Lord” was a translation of the Hebrew word *adonai*, which referred to the “Supreme Lord.” The title was an incommunicable name used as a replacement for the title “Jehovah,” a name which Jews would not utter through their lips.⁶ Paul’s meaning was not missed by his readers. He presented Jesus as God. Not only did the Ephesians have an opportunity to relate to the Lord through a parental/child relationship, but they also had an opportunity to relate to the One True God. Such is the

⁶ Hodge, 4.

experience of the Christian life. God has a people, and He has a plan for His people. Part of that plan involves a relationship!