

Ephesians 1

We're going to spend the next several weeks working our way through the book of Ephesians. The book is one of Paul's letters. Over this time, we'll end up reading through most of it. There's some dispute about whether Paul himself wrote the letter during his lifetime, or if one of his students wrote it after Paul's death.

For our purposes, for a lot of it doesn't matter too much. But there are some differences between this letter and Paul's earlier letters. Probably the most significant, and problematic for us, is the introduction of hierarchy...a sort of ranking system...that is not present in earlier letters, nor in the teachings of Jesus.

As the early church became more structured, it became more of a hierarchy...and honestly more male dominated. That sort of goes against what Paul wrote in earlier letters. We will address that later on when we address what I'm going to call "the problem passages." If you read the whole book, you'll be able to pick out which ones I'm talking about.

And I would encourage you to read the whole letter, from beginning to end. I'll put a link on the church website and send it to everyone if it's easier to read online.

It can be a pretty quick read – it's only six chapters. But it's not necessarily an easy read. Paul's letters never are. You might find yourself thinking, boy Paul could have used a lesson in punctuation.

But none of the ancient Greek manuscripts had any punctuation at all. With some of the books of the New Testament, like the gospels, there are some natural breaks so translators have inserted periods and commas. Paul's writing on the other hand, is complex and wordy, and arriving at a place to put a punctuation mark is challenging.

But Ephesians can also be read sort of poetically. So I'd suggest sitting down to read it and just letting the words flow, without pondering too much. Some passages are popular and you may recognize them. Some have made it into our liturgy, and you hear them all the time. And, as I said, you'll bump into the problem passages.

Let's just say a tiny bit about Paul before we dive in. Paul was a Jewish scholar. When the early Christian church was getting off the ground after Pentecost, Paul persecuted the Christians. He hauled them off to jail. He held men's coats as they stoned Stephen, an early servant of the church.

But in a blinding epiphany on a road to Damascus, the risen Christ appeared to him. He was taken to Damascus. Converted by what happened, he was baptized and became early Christianity's best known preacher and church planter.

He then communicated with churches he had established through a series of letters. A good chunk of the New Testament, outside the gospels, is made up by those letters.

Those letters were basically Paul working out what the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ meant for the church and for the world.

The times he lived in naturally impacted his writing. That creates some of the difficulties for us as we read and apply the letters in our time. Much of what Paul wrote is truth for all time. On the other hand, some was specific to those churches and is bound to the time and place in which he lived. Discerning which is which is part of the challenge of reading Paul.

So, onto this first section.

You often hear Christians talk about God's plan. It's often used when something bad happens...an untimely death or other tragedy. Someone will say that what happened is somehow part of God's plan. The Bible doesn't say that, and in fact in places says the opposite.

Christians will also talk about God's plan for them as some specific job or marriage partner or a certain ministry. While I believe God does call us to some specific ways to live out our faith, we can become too obsessed with the idea that there's only one right path for us and we'd better get it right.

But now listen to these phrases from our reading today...

God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing

God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world

...destined us for adoption as God's beloved children

We have been redeemed through Christ's blood from the powers of evil

God has given us the forgiveness of our trespasses

... lavished us with grace

...made known to us the mystery of God's will

God will gather up all things to Godself, things in heaven and things on earth

In Christ we have obtained an inheritance

We are destined to live for the praise of God's glory

We are marked with the seal of the promised holy Spirit

That's God's plan.

To bless...to choose...to adopt...to lavish us with grace...to redeem...to forgive

And what's more, God planned all that for us from the very beginning. Before you or I were even a thought, this was our destiny.

And not only that, being gathered up in Christ is the plan for all of creation...things in heaven and things on earth.

We have a bad habit of thinking we know more about God and God's plan than we possibly can. We put limits and restrictions on God's blessing and God's grace, not only for others, but also for ourselves!

We too often think we don't deserve that kind of love, so why would God want to give it to us?

As you think back over your life, what things stand out? How do you think about them?

I can't speak for everyone, but often in my head I keep a sort of tally sheet. I think through accomplishments and successes. I remember things I've done to help others...times when I've been at least somewhat more concerned for the well-being of another than for myself.

Those get a check mark in the plus column.

Then I think about the times I've messed up...the failures. Times I've made mistakes that affected someone. Times I've said or done the wrong thing. Or for me, more often failed to do or say something I wish I would have.

Those things get a check mark in the minus column.

Then you add up the pluses, subtract the minuses and decide how you rate. But what's the metric? What score is a good score? Sometimes we are too likely to rank ourselves as just a cut above other people. A little smarter...a little better looking...a little kinder.

But there will always be just that bit of doubt. What if I'm wrong? What if I'm not that great? What if I'm a fraud...an imposter? Any evidence that we're not so great can be so upsetting to our ego that we project our insecurity onto others in ways that can be downright mean.

Or other times we go the opposite route – we decide we're more failure than success, and we worry if people truly know us they'll see what losers we are. And surely God must think so too.

If we're to believe this introduction to the letter to the Ephesians, God doesn't work that way at all. Before we even existed, before God even knew what we would be like, God's plan was to bless us and lavish us with grace. God's plan all along has been to redeem us from the powers of evil that operate in the heavens and the earth.

God's plan is to draw us to Godself...and all of creation as well.

There are no plus or minus check marks in this passage.

If this is God's plan, who are we to say it can't happen? Who are we to say we, or anyone else, isn't worthy?

Instead of spending time drawing up this detailed checklist, our response to this amazing grace...is praise.

We're not to live worthy lives so that we will receive grace. Rather we are to live lives worthy of the grace we've already been given.

The rest of the letter works through what that means. It's an exploration at times of the cosmic forces at work in the world, and at other times it deals with the most mundane aspects of Christian life.

But through it all is the message that God's grace comes first...that before we were called to do anything, before we even existed, we were lavishly blessed by God's grace, and made God's beloved children.