

The Tragedy of an Unopened Gift

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- [0 : 00] So, we come to Ephesians chapter 1, and this is an amazing epistle in its way. People have described it in a variety of kind of really focused and, yeah, literary ways. Somebody wrote this, that it is the refined essence of the whole gospel. I remember hearing Billy Graham on a radio program in the USA, which is a bit similar to Desert Island Discs, and he was asked, if you could only take one book or one epistle in the Bible, what would you take? Billy Graham said, I take Ephesians every time. Why, said the speaker, he said, because it tells me three things. I'm going to come back to that in a minute. But the gospel, which is enshrined in this book, praise God, has changed lives throughout the centuries and continues to change lives today.
- [1 : 14] Someone say hallelujah. As we meet now, there are some people meeting in an Alpha group in the room next door to us, praying for them, that those people who are challenged through the material that Alpha provides would come to know Christ themselves. And the gospel, I think, is a really, well, if you ask me, you know, you'd probably say, well, you get paid for it. Well, I don't anymore as it happens. But the gospel, I think, is the only answer to the way that the world is at this time. I really do believe that. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a purposeful plot to kind of marginalize religion, certainly from public life, but marginalize it altogether. And I think in some ways we see that happening in our culture. On the other hand, people in your churches and people I talk to who are ministers or members of other churches are telling me that suddenly people are starting to turn up in their churches.
- [2 : 32] I mean, sadly, people still dying in churches, but there are some people kind of turning up to take their place on the pews of the church. And that's a good thing. But I want to say to you that this epistle, I think, if you wanted an epistle which would best sum up the gospel as revealed to us in Holy Scripture, Ephesians, I think, is really good. If you are of a more kind of academic, geeky mind, you might well think that Romans would be a very good competitor. And I agree with that. But in terms of succinctness, Ephesians is really, it kind of nails it, I think you would say. So I just want to give you some facts. I mean, these are kind of vaguely interesting to me. The first of these is, who was this letter written to? And the answer is not entirely clear.
- [3 : 35] And the reason for that, some of you who are in Christchurch on Sunday would have heard our preacher make reference to this. In the very earliest text that we have in relation to the Bible, the letter omits the words to the Christians in Ephesus. This has led to a lot of speculation as to who wrote the epistle. For myself, I accept it at face value.

I think St. Paul wrote it. But one of the big bits of evidence that the people who doubt whether St. Paul wrote it, some of them are linguistic people and say that there are certain themes that occur in Paul's other letters that don't occur in Ephesians.

But suppose that, if you can just hold this in your imagination for a moment, let's just suppose for a moment that this was a circular letter.

It certainly went to the Ephesians, but didn't only go to the Ephesians. I think you would write a letter entirely different if it was a circular letter than if you were writing to a particular location.

[4 : 44] And I think it's likely that this was a round robin letter that went to the churches that Paul had planted. Incidentally, we do have the narrative account of Paul's planting the church in Ephesus.

You can read about that. If you like homework, here you go. You can read about that in Acts chapter 19. Paul stayed in Ephesus for three years. And his goal, what an amazing goal this is.

He wanted to preach the gospel to everybody in Asia Minor. I mean, imagine that. I mean, it wouldn't be the same. It would be a much stiffer assignment today because a lot more people live there than live there then.

But what a great aspiration for a preacher that everybody within my sphere of influence should hear the gospel from my lips. So, I think this was a circular letter.

And I think the other bit of evidence that people say means Paul didn't write it was that at the end of most of his letters, you remember he has these ascriptions to individuals.

[5 : 54] At the end of Romans, he talks quite a lot about the people he knows in Rome. At the end of Galatians, the same. But there are none at the end of Ephesians. And people say, well, that's not Paul at all.

Well, if we're right and this was a circular letter, that would make a big difference, wouldn't it? You wouldn't be writing to individuals if the letter was going to be shown around a dozen congregations or whatever.

When was it written? I think it was written. Again, big debate amongst the scholars about this. More modern scholarship tends to put the epistle around about A.D. 80.

I think I'd go with the more conservative scholars who say it's very likely that this epistle was written from Rome in about the year A.D. 61-62 when Paul was in prison in Rome at the end of one of his mission journeys.

So there we are. I mean, you have to make your own mind about this. I'm not sure that it was just a letter to the Ephesians, though it certainly was a letter to the Ephesians. I think Paul wrote it.

[7 : 11] I think it was written around about 61-62 A.D. Not long before, in fact, Paul died. And the epistle was written from prison in Rome.

Why was the epistle written? I think this is really important. And it was important then. And it might be even more important today. I think there are three primary reasons why Ephesians was written.

It was written to remind us who we are in Christ. And that seems to me to be a pretty fundamental question.

You remember, if you know your New Testament, that Paul has a phrase he constantly repeats. And the phrase is, in Christ.

And by in Christ, he means those people who have faith in Jesus Christ. And they are, that come back to this, but those who are in Christ are the only recipients of God's promises outlined in the rest of the epistle.

[8 : 27] Secondly, it's to remind us who we were without Christ. At the beginning of chapter 2, and I'll just give you a flavour of this.

I mean, it's not very flattering, to be quite honest with you. Paul writes this kind of stuff. As for you, he says, chapter 2, verse 1, You were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdoms of the air, the spirit who is now at work to those who are disobedient.

And it gets a bit worse from there on in. But what Paul's saying is, never forget the magnitude of what Jesus Christ has done for you.

Never forget that. And if you're going to get what, the magnitude of what Jesus has done for you, you need to be reminded of what you were before you came to Christ.

I was joking with somebody who I was putting some chairs out there, was putting the back row ones out, and they were debating whether to sit on the back seat. And I said, well, when I was a teenager, the back seat of the cinema was a highly prized place to sit.

[9 : 49] She said, really? I said, yeah, you know, so you could lead young women astray on the back row kind of thing. What, you? I said, well, I wasn't a Christian then. And so she said, really?

I said, yeah. I said, because I was a moron. And actually, that's what Ephesians chapter 2 tells me. Before Christ, in God's eyes, in my own eyes, as a matter of fact, I was a moron.

And the third reason that Paul wrote this epistle was to show us that belief and behavior need to be in line with each other. Paul repeatedly, in his epistles, has a kind of stylistic characteristic.

And it's this. First of all, he'll work out, this is what you need to believe. And then he'll say, and because of that, this is the way you need to behave.

I think that's reasonable. We all, you know, would accept that saying what we believe, you know, would normally affect the way that we behave.

[10 : 58] If we believe it's going to rain, we'll take action, maybe put a waterproof on or take an umbrella or something like that. We wouldn't welcome, you know, somebody turns up at your house and they've omitted to tell you that they're vegetarian and you're just about to serve Chateau Brion.

And it comes out and it looks delicious and you're starting to share it and the person says, oh, I'm a vegetarian. You're like, right, you know, great.

Sorry, that's not an offence against vegetarians. But here's the thing. If they then said, oh no, I'll have a piece of that, you would think they weren't that committed to their vegetarianism, wouldn't you?

And the same is true of our faith. If we claim to believe what we believe when we believe the gospel and we honour God's word and our preacher on Sunday reminded us of something really important, which I wish churches together had been here to hear what he said because he said, really when it comes to the unity of the church, the starting point needs to be some agreement as to the authority of God's word, the Bible.

If we all think different things, I mean, I've had, I've had clergy say to me, well, of course, we don't read the Bible in our church anymore.

[12 : 30] Why? Because it's nonsense. An ordained person. God give me strength. So, those are the three primary areas.

I'm going to come back to the recipients of God's promise a little later in what I have to say to you. So, in Ephesians 1 to 10, in verse 1, we get an important phrase.

You know, Paul started all his letters with what's called an ascription. That is a kind of ritualized way of starting a letter. And the letter to the Ephesians is absolutely no different in this respect.

And in that letter, he starts by saying, if I can find it, he starts by saying, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

I think that's really important. It was really important to Paul to know that his route to apostleship was not mainline. All the other apostles had been with Jesus.

[13 : 49] Paul hadn't. You remember the Damascus Road conversion that he went through. And in the Corinthian congregation, there were people in that church, because Paul had never been with Jesus, there were people in that church who really thought that Paul was not a genuine apostle.

And they questioned his apostleship. So Paul's laying out here for the Ephesians from verse 1 onwards. An apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. God willed this.

It wasn't some historic accident that I happened to be with Jesus when he walked planet Earth. No, I'm an apostle by the will of God. To the saints in Ephesus.

Who are the saints? Well, certainly in the Church of England, we tend to think of saints as the kind of characters who end up in stained glass windows. And, you know, some people find stained glass windows extremely beautiful.

Some people are a little indifferent to them. But actually, that's not the point. When Paul's talking about the saints in Ephesus, he's talking about every believer in Christ.

[15 : 05] I remember once, my wife and I used to work on this lay Christian community, and every day, it was the task of people in the community to lead morning prayer and to give a little thought for the day.

I've never forgot the one that this guy, Uncle Johnny was called, he was an older guy, and he came, and what he had was, he had like an easel, and there was something covered up on it, which was either a blackboard or a picture or something.

And he talked about the saints, and he made the point that I've just made, that in Paul's mind, the saints were not the worthies who end up in stained glass windows, but were ordinary, faithful Christians who were in Christ.

And he invited a member of the community to come and unveil what he described as a picture of a wonderful saint. And this woman trooped up to the front, and he said, now there you are, he says, like the queen, you're unveiling a picture.

She pulled the cover off it, and it was a mirror. She saw herself. I thought it made the point very well. That in Christ, Paul would regard us as the Hagioi, the saints in Ephesus.

[16 : 28] And then the usual description, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ. It was pretty common amongst Christians who would write to each other to put that kind of ascription into a letter that they wrote.

I mean, you know, one of the things that does seem kind of unbelievable to me is, I mean, have you ever written a letter that in any way resemble the letters of St. Paul?

I mean, it's just unbelievable to think that anybody would sit down and write this stuff. One of the people who was talking about the eloquence and beauty of the epistle to the Ephesians said he was reminded of Mozart in his composition.

You remember Mozart? It's said there. He just kind of leant over on his table, and all these notes were in his head, and he just kind of wrote them as if somebody was dictating them to him. And the person said, Ephesians is like Paul's compositions.

It's like a kind of stream of holy consciousness from the mind of this amazing man, St. Paul. Grace and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[17 : 55] There's a Roman Catholic bishop who I've started to listen to a little bit on YouTube. His name is Robert Barron. One of the big advantages of his talks are is they're about 12 minutes long or 13 minutes long.

But I've noticed with him, whenever he starts anything, or if you meet him, the first thing he will say to you, a bit like the subscription, he will say to you, peace be to you, peace be with you.

Of course, the Anglicans always say and also with you, but it's him, in a sense, trying to give the, what's about to follow in your conversation, a kind of base in the peace of God which passes all understanding.

So Paul goes on, praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

I think I certainly said this to the congregation in Christ's church, but does anybody remember the Beverly Hillbillies?

[19 : 10] Remember this kind of Hick family who lived in central North America and, you know, I mentioned somewhere like Nebraska and they're scratching a living off, you know, this kind of market garden that they've got, poor folks.

And one day, old Jed is out on the market garden and he chucks his pickaxe into the thing and oil comes spurting out.

And suddenly, they went from overnight to being porpoise, to being absolutely filthy rich. So they did what filthy rich people do in America and they moved to California and they bought this massive mansion and they didn't realise that to live in a massive house, you need to have had prior experience of living in a big house because it's not straightforward.

So, you know, there are these comic scenes where they'd be in the billiard room mistaking it for the dining room and wondering what these nets were in the corner of their dining room table.

And in the end, they settled for living in the kitchen. They got this marvellous 17-bedroom mansion and most of their time was spent in the kitchen.

[20 : 37] I've often wondered, is that an illustration for us? That Paul's telling you here, if you are in Christ, that you have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm.

You might be saying to yourself, well, I don't know what that is, you know, what's that? You know, I've got my mind set on earthly things. But let me just outline for you what I think, and this is where the New Testament's very helpful because what happens is Paul talks about these spiritual blessings and then he outlines them in the rest of the verses we're studying tonight.

So let me remind you what those blessings are. First of all, in verse 4, Paul tells us that God chose you. Chose you before the creation of the world.

I mean, that is just totally mind-boggling, isn't it? But God chose you. You're not a Christian by some random thing, but God chose you. Second, it says, he adopted you.

It says when we were born in Genesis that we were all born in the image of the God, but our sinfulness and our wretchedness shatters that image.

[22 : 02] And God adopts us and starts to rebuild his image in us. Verse 5. Verse 6, his glorious grace. You know, every day of my life I thank God for his grace.

His love shown to me even though I don't deserve it. And grace is, you know, I mean, you all know that and you know that what grace is is God's love shown to us even though we don't deserve it.

But then I think we find it a very difficult concept to kind of settle in our soul. Especially in a kind of meritocracy, you know, where we think that people on the whole get what they deserve.

Believe me, if I got what I deserve, I wouldn't be standing here in front of you this evening. His glorious grace. Fourthly, God redeemed us.

Verse 7, we're told. That means he bought us back. To redeem a slave, you had to pay a sum of money. And then the slave could be freed.

[23 : 19] And of course, as Paul says, the price for your redemption was the death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. We hear much more about that when we look at chapter 2 next week.

Here's some other blessings Paul mentions. Verse 8, wisdom and understanding. Verse 9, he's revealed to us the mystery of his will. And mystery here doesn't mean the way that we use it in relation to certain ways that some churches worship.

I mean, I think there is something very attractive about churches which carry an element of mystery in the way that they worship. But here, the word mystery means, the revelation of an event previously unknown.

So when Paul's talking about the mystery of his will, what he's saying is God is revealing to us that which we could not know for ourselves. And the final thing is, our preacher on Sunday in this church made, I think, really made a really good job of explaining this.

He promises a spectacular fulfillment of all things. There will be a time, very hard to believe in the current climate, when the sovereignty of God will be obvious to all and he will return and wind up the whole of human history.

[25 : 00] So, these blessings, it seems to me, are, frankly, I wonder to how many of you some of those blessings are kind of, you know, this is a new discovery.

And let me just stress, Paul's writing in the past tense, he's not saying you'll get all this stuff sometime, he says God has blessed you in the heavenly realms with every spiritual gift.

So, just a few minutes exploring some topics that I think have been discussed endlessly in the church throughout history. One, did God choose us or did we choose him?

Paul also uses the word predestined here, and those of you who know anything about church history and know anything about the debate, John Calvin, one of the great reformers of the church, talked about, picked up on these verses, some of them are in Romans, some of them in Ephesians, that we are predestined.

That is, from the beginning of time, God had in his mind those whom he would reveal himself to and save from the coming wrath.

[26 : 21] Now, that fact, stated broadly like that, I think doesn't sit well with many of us. and there is a school of theology that attacks Calvin and says, well, if Calvin believed that, why would he ever do any mission or evangelism?

If it was all settled anyway, what's the point? That's not a bad question. I mean, it's not actually what John Calvin himself ever said.

Some of his lieutenants reinforced that point a little after his time. And, you know, there are people, extreme Calvinists.

I remember having a, I was going to say an argument, I mean a loving debate with a friend of mine in Alabama, in the southern states of America.

And he was like, you should never ever make an appeal for people to do something in response to the gospel. I said, well, nobody told Billy Graham that.

[27 : 31] And, no, he said, you know, to do that is a work of the Lord. Billy Graham had got it wrong. Anybody who thinks that we have to respond to God's choice of us is wrong.

And I chose to differ. One of my arguments was, well, when the Philippian jailer, you know, panicked because all his prisoners had escaped, and, you know, mouthed out this question aloud, what must I do to be saved?

The apostles didn't say to him, nothing, mate, it's all settled. Don't worry about it, you know, P.S., you're going to hell. They said, no, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

I want here to introduce you to the idea of paradox. A paradox is two statements which apparently contradict each other but can be held in creative tension with each other in such a way that it reveals a truth.

And the paradox is this, Paul here is saying that God chose us, chose you, before the beginning of time. On the other hand, we know that Paul invited people to trust Christ.

[28 : 49] There is, we have to respond to the love and grace of God. And though those statements can be used, if you like, to create an unhelpful tension, was I chosen or did I choose?

I mean, to understand the thing, I mean, I think it's tricky for us because you have to understand that in our culture choice has a very elevated status.

we all like to think we choose. In a consumer society, one of the gods we worship is the god of choice. More choices, the better.

I mean, that might not be a bad thing if you're talking about cheese crackers, but it becomes a really serious thing if you're talking about sexual lifestyles.

choice in our culture, as I say, has been elevated to the point of it has a kind of energy of its own.

[29 : 55] You know, you must never question people's right to choose. This has been reinforced incidentally by identity politics on the one hand and the whole idea of rights on the other hand.

I mean, no Christian probably is going to be ipso facto against human rights, but what you've got to bear in mind is the moment I express my rights, the danger is, and this is what judges are left to sort out at the moment, is when do my rights trump your rights?

I wouldn't like to be a judge, trust me, and if I was a judge, I'd be a pretty fierce one. And so understanding the way choice is helps us to understand why we sit a little uncomfortably with one half of the paradox where Paul is telling us that we've been chosen from before the beginning of time.

And the whole predestination debate stems from that fact and slightly ignores the fact that it is true that throughout scripture you find people who do something to respond to God.

People like Zacchaeus. Was Zacchaeus wrong to climb that tree? Was that a work of the law in Paul's lingo? Or was it his way of coming to Christ?

[31 : 33] So paradoxes, two statements. Here are the two statements I'm talking about. on the one hand, the statement that we're chosen before time, that's the end of it. The other one is, we choose.

I was six years old, no, five years old, when the Billy Graham crusade in Haringey took place.

Looking at some of you, you're old enough to remember that. it was the most successful evangelistic campaign that Billy Graham ever ran outside of mainland America.

Thousands and thousands and thousands of people chose to follow Jesus, came down to the front of the auditorium, and were taken off and counseled.

A lot of those people, sadly only men in those days, were joined into ministry. The Methodist Church, got into ministry in the Church of England.

[32 : 39] I mean, a lot of them now, who are ministers, who came to Christ in that crusade, I don't think would espouse the theology that underlay that crusade, but nevertheless, it was a tipping point for them.

Hundreds of men and women came forward and were saved. I still meet people occasionally who tell me they were saved at the Haringey Crusade in 1954.

That tells me two things. They've been saved for eternity, and secondly, they must be older than me. So the predestination debate, I don't think it's an either or choice, I think it's a both and.

I think there is a sense in which we're chosen, and by in that sense, what I mean is, there is nothing about your conversion at any point, that God was not the instigator of.

There are some dear friends in the audience tonight who went to the last alpha group that this church ran. And that's not kind of accidental.

[33 : 53] You know, that's something that God wanted for them at that time. and from what I can see, it was a powerful thing that happened. But it calls for a response.

And I'm not going to say that responding to God is a work of the law, which some extreme Calvinists would say. No, I'm going to tell you that I think I heard the gospel preached once, I was in such a state, I gave my life to Christ there and then.

I was invited to, and I did. And then in verse 10, the last verse we read, Paul talks about what's going to happen at the end.

God's made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ. This is not random. It's one of the things that, you know, I always want to say to the new atheists, you know, there's nothing random in this life.

If you think that the beauty of this world, the order of this world, was the act of a random collision of atoms at the right temperature, you've got more faith than I have.

[35 : 12] So, where are we fixing our eyes at the moment? Are we fixing our eyes purely on what we see now? To Corinthians 4.18, Paul says this, he said, we don't fix our eyes on the things that are transitory, which are now.

He said, no, we fix our eyes on the things that are eternal. I mean, do we enough? Now, how much time do you spend thinking about what happens to you when you die?

How much time do you spend thinking about the transition from this life to heaven if you're in Christ? Christ? No, I think the African church and the Asian church look at the church in the west and they think, people have said it to me, you know, trouble with your churches, it's worldly.

Why is it worldly? Because we're too focused on this life, we're too focused, as Paul said, not on the spiritual blessings in the heavenly realms, but the blessings that we have or desire in this life.

Somebody said a new heart is better than a new car. I wonder how many of us believe that. It struck me, you know, the moment it said it, it made me think of recently, Ant and I walking along the road and there was a model of a car I really covered there and I went into a kind of a shambolic state and looked at this car and then I remembered that phrase as I had been preparing what I was going to say tonight, a new heart is more exciting than a new car.

[37 : 04] I love that. So here are some things for you to ponder this Lent very briefly as I come to a close. The first thing is the clarity of the direction of God's promises.

Look, these are not abstract promises. These are not just some random thoughts that St. Paul was spewing out because he couldn't think of anything else to say to the Ephesians.

The clarity of the direction is amazing. And one of the things that you need to understand is that all these promises relate to people who are in Christ.

I have no idea whether there are other ways that you can get to heaven. But I know one way, and that's the way Paul outlines in this gospel that we're about to study.

And, you know, I'm sure that there will be some prizes, some surprises for us all in heaven. Second, we talk a lot about identity in our culture.

[38 : 20] And of course, identity is far more complicated than just aligning yourself with one particular group. I mean, what would you say you're, if somebody said to me, what's your identity?

I would say, I'm a Christian, I'm a husband, I'm a father, not very good at it, but I am one. I would say, I'd say stuff like that.

The first thing I would say, my primary identity is in Christ. I am his, and he is mine, as the old hymn put it.

Thirdly, how much do we live in the light of the spiritual gifts, in the spiritual blessings in the heavenly realms? Or is the truth, we're far too focused in the Western church on earthly blessings?

And finally, do I need to refocus on God's future? Are my eyes truly fixed on the things that are permanent and eternal?

[39 : 35] Or are they fixed too much in the here and now? I've often wondered, you know, my burden, incidentally, is that as churches in this town of ours, that we might yet cooperate better together in getting a plan to re-evangelize this town.

I would love to see that happen. I think some things are going to have to change before that does happen, but nevertheless, I think a plan together to re-evangelize this town could be an amazing thing.

It starts a bit like this when Christians who don't normally sit together on a Sunday gather together in a church on a Tuesday evening for six weeks.

years. But I don't want to waste that energy. I don't want us to just have, I hope you will have a good six weeks here together, but I want more than that.

I want to see us bring this amazing gospel that we will unwrap in the course of the next few weeks, see where we go with it.

[40 : 56] I'm up for it. Anybody wants to join me, you're most welcome. Thank you.