

Navigating An Alternative Reading Of Reality

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- [0 : 0 0] Last Thursday, three days ago now, I acquired a new set of glasses. The young woman who helped me select the frames said that they made me look younger.
- What do you think? She also said that the color of the rims matched the tone of my skin better.
- She was well trained. But I've needed new glasses for some time. Over the past six or eight months, I have struggled to see clearly.
- As I turn my head from side to side, it's just taking far too long for things to come into focus. Especially when reading, which I do a lot, and when preaching.
- I would look out at all of you and then look down at my notes, and it was taking far too long to be able to find the words on the page. And then when I looked up at you again, it was taking far too long for me to make out your faces.
- [1 : 0 5] And it was all very draining. But now, I can both see your faces. You were really, really much more beautiful than I knew.
- And I can see my notes. Clearly. Without strain. Thank you, Lord. Which is what the New Testament document we refer to as Ephesians does for us.
- It helps us see clearly. It enables us to see more clearly. It is what all of Holy Scripture does for us.
- Or at least is designed to do for us. But nowhere more effectively for me than in the letter the Apostle Paul writes to the disciples of Jesus in the first century city of Ephesus.
- It is, after all, what he prays for us. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know the hope of his calling, what are the riches of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing power toward us who believe.
- [2 : 2 3] Paul, and the Spirit of God who inspires him, wants us to see clearly without the strain. Thank you, Lord.
- In the letter to the Ephesians, written about 62 A.D., we are given a new set of glasses. Or, to put it in more contemporary terms, in the letter we are given an alternative reading of reality.
- I get the phrase from biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. In the letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle of Jesus Christ gives us an alternative reading of reality.
- An alternative reading shaped by the gospel of your salvation, as he calls it. An alternative reading shaped by Christmas, and Good Friday, and Easter, and the Ascension, and Pentecost.
- And more than an alternative reading, in the letter to the Ephesians, through the letter to the Ephesians, we are slowly but surely drawn into the alternative reality itself.
- [3 : 2 9] Slowly but surely, we realize that we are not only seeing things differently, things really are different.

Things are not as they seem, Paul is saying to us. Or more exactly, things are not only as they seem. There is more to reality than meets our unaided senses, and emotions, and intellect.

A whole lot more. And no other book of the Bible, except the last one, the revelation of Jesus Christ, opens up that more, as expansively, and concretely, as the letter from a prison cell we call Ephesians.

And so, I invite you to come with me on an adventure, in an alternative reading of reality. Our text today is the opening section.

Chapter 1, verses 1 to 2, Paul's opening greeting. But I'd also like to read what immediately follows to give us a taste of what is to come.

[4 : 37] Ephesians, chapter 1, verses 1 to 14. Hear the word of God. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and who are faithful in Christ Jesus, grace to you, and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.

In love, He predestined us to adoption as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

In Him, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight, He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention, which He purposed in Him, with a view to the administration suitable to the fullness of times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth.

In Him, also, we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose, who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.

[6 : 20] In Him, you also, having listened to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.

Wow. Let us pray. Living God, we believe that you got a hold of Paul, that you enabled him to think these massively expansive thoughts and to write them down for us.

And I pray now in your mercy and grace that you would help us not only understand these words, but you would help us actually live into the reality these words are describing as never before.

For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, here's how I want to proceed today. I want to focus in turn on Paul, Ephesus, Paul and Ephesus, and this opening greeting.

Who is this man, Paul? What was life like in Ephesus? What's the connection between Paul and Ephesus? And how does Paul set the stage for his, for the Gospels, alternative reading of reality?

[7 : 55] So, Paul, then Ephesus, then Paul and Ephesus, and then the opening greeting. But first, a word about the little phrase, at Ephesus.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, to the saints that are at Ephesus. You may know that many manuscripts do not contain that little phrase at Ephesus.

And scholars have different opinions as to why. Here's what I think. Paul's original letter, the first manuscript, if you will, had the address at Ephesus.

That is, he wrote this letter to his friends in the city of Ephesus. But, people quickly realized that although Paul was writing to specific people in a specific church at a specific city, they realized that Paul was also speaking more widely to all the other churches around Ephesus.

This, I think, explains why in this letter he does not greet people like he does in other letters and why in this letter he's not addressing any particular problem. People soon realized that this letter to the Ephesians is really Paul's letter to the churches anywhere and everywhere.

[9 : 15] The letter is a kind of encyclical to the whole church of Jesus Christ. So, I think, that when those who copied these manuscripts to pass them on to other churches, they realized that it belonged to other churches and they just left out the at Ephesus.

Which means that we can insert at the at Ephesus slot to the saints in Laodicea, to the saints in Athens, to the saints in Rome, to the saints in Hong Kong, or Seoul, or Rio de Janeiro, or Brisbane, or Tucson, or to the saints in Vancouver.

This letter is also addressed to us. Paul, Ephesus, Paul and Ephesus, and the opening greetings.

Paul. What do we need to know about this man as we make our way through his letter? Paul is the name that was given to him after his encounter with Jesus.

He was born Saul in honor of Israel's first king. He was born early in the first century B.C., sometime after the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, somewhere between 5 and 10 A.D.

[10 : 32] He was born to Jewish parents who happened to also be Roman citizens, which meant he then was born with this unspeakable privilege of citizenship in the Roman Empire, which became very important later in his life.

He was born in the city of Tarsus in Cilicia, in an area that is now modern-day Turkey. Tarsus was a university town, a center of learning.

Pythagoras spent some time there. So did Parmenides and Zenon and Democrates. Tarsus was a multicultural, multiracial, multireligious city.

Jews, Greeks, and Romans all lived and worked and worshipped in the city. In the early years of the first century, Tarsus had a population of 500,000 people, which means that from the beginning of his life, Saul understands urban life.

He understands where we live. He understands an urban world. At some point in his later childhood, his family moved from Tarsus to Jerusalem, or at least they would spend long visits there in the holy city.

[11 : 59] In Jerusalem, Saul became a student of the Rabbi Gamaliel, and Gamaliel was the grandson and successor of the Rabbi Hillel, one of Judaism's greatest thinkers and teachers.

Saul was an excellent student, rising to the top of his class, rising in the ranks of scholarly Phariseeism. He was in such high ranks that when first Christians were brought to trial, Saul was in a position to be able to cast votes for their punishment.

Now, I think what's important to realize is that Saul Paul's first response to the gospel of Jesus Christ was horror. His first response was not joy, it was not belief, his first response was horror.

Christ crucified? The Messiah crucified? No way. Heresy? Blasphemy? Risen from the dead?

No way. Nonsense. So problematic was the gospel to Paul that he felt he had to do everything he could to stamp it out.

[13 : 13] those who preached this nonsense in this heresy must be destroyed. He was on his way to the city of Damascus, the capital of modern-day Syria.

He was on his way to arrest disciples of the way, as they were called that time, to bring them back to Jerusalem, to make them stand for trial, and then to receive punishment. about noon one day, suddenly, a light from heaven flashed around him.

That's how Luke, the doctor, says it in his Acts of the Apostles. Suddenly, a light from heaven flashed around him, and Saul fell to the ground.

I would, you would, and he heard a voice saying, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Who are you, Lord?

Saul replies, and the voice says, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. In that Damascus encounter, Saul discovers grace.

[14 : 25] He hated the name Jesus, and he hated anyone who named the name Jesus. He wanted this name erased from the pages of history, and yet, Jesus chose to love this man.

Jesus chooses to bring Saul into relationship with him, and make him his chosen ambassador. Grace. Sheer grace.

And Paul would never forget that. In the Damascus encounter, Paul discovers that Jesus is alive. The crucified one really is alive.

The news from Jerusalem cemetery is not nonsense. Jesus really is alive. In that encounter, Paul discovers that Jesus is therefore Lord.

Paul's first word to Jesus is Lord. And Paul knows what that word means. He knows the meaning in the word he has chosen. It's the word kurios.

[15 : 27] It's the word used to refer to Israel's God, Yahweh, and it's the word to refer to Rome's emperor, Caesar. Kurios, Lord.

Jesus is Lord. And in that encounter, Paul discovers the wonder of being the church. Why are you persecuting me, Jesus asks.

Me? Was Paul persecuting Jesus? Paul was threatening and harming the followers of Jesus, but was he persecuting Jesus? Yes. It turns out he was.

For what we do to Jesus' disciples, we somehow do to Jesus. What we do to the body of Christ in the world, we somehow do to Jesus. From that day on the Damascus road, Paul became a Jesus captured man, a Jesus apprehended man, a Jesus enthralled man, and a Jesus sent man.

Thus the term apostle. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus. Apostle simply means sent one.

[16 : 39] Authorized by the sender to speak the word of the sender. Apostle of Messiah Jesus. One of the greatest privileges any human being can ever be granted.

Sent by the Messiah, sent by the Kurios to speak the Messiah's message, to speak the Kurios message to the world. Paul, the persecutor, Paul, the terrorist, becomes, as N.T.

Wright says, the greatest interpreter of the mind of Jesus ever to live. Paul. Ephesus. What do we need to know about Ephesus as we make our way through the letter to the Ephesians?

Ephesus was located about four miles inland from the Aegean Sea on the coast of modern Turkey. Some years before it had been a seaport, but over the decades the silt from the crisis river began to build up and the city had to move more and more inland.

Now, at the time that the gospel first came to Ephesus, it had a population of 225,000 to 250,000 people.

[17 : 48] again, we are reminded that the gospel begins in urban centers. Urban reality is not foreign to the gospel.

Ephesus was called the first and grandest metropolis of Asia, ranking in importance in the empire only behind Athens and Rome.

It was the largest trading center in Asia Minor largely because of its proximity to great shipping routes, the so-called royal road went through the city linking east and west and bringing into the city people from all over the world, people with all kinds of different philosophical and religious ideas, all kinds of alternative readings of reality.

Now, the city had a fabulous theater that could seat 24,000 people. It was so acoustically engineered that a speaker could stand at a particular place on the stage and simply whisper and all 24,000 people could hear.

I experienced that myself in a similar theater built by the Romans in Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon. I stood there and spoke and all the people could hear just by whispering.

[19 : 10] I mean, these dudes were brilliant builders. the city also had a massive temple dedicated to the worship of the goddess Artemis, as the Greeks called her, or Diana, as the Romans called her.

She was the goddess of sexual fertility, who was represented in a statue with many breasts. Her temple was 69 meters wide and 130 meters long.

That's 275 feet wide and 425 feet long. It had 127 columns, each of which were 18 meters or 60 feet high and 2 meters or 6 feet in diameter.

It was larger than any modern football stadium, CFL or NFL. Larger than BC place. And larger than the largest football stadium in Dallas, Texas.

It was four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. It was the largest known building of antiquity. It was one of the seven wonders of the world.

[20 : 24] Understandably then, life in Ephesus was dominated by this temple and revolved around the temple of Artemis, Diana. Diana is even called the wife of Ephesus, the protectress and nourisher of the city.

Now, is this why Paul speaks so much in his letter about temples? And is this not part of the reason why in his letter Paul speaks about the relationship between Jesus and his church in terms of a husband and a wife?

Ephesus of Ephesus was especially known as a center for magical practices. As one New Testament scholar says, the city was obsessed with demons and spirits.

People, therefore, in the city were always talking about spiritual power. Indeed, the goddess Artemis, Diana, was thought to be the goddess of power.

She was thought to be one of the most powerful of all deities and she was the one sought out to protect you against other powers and spirits. Now, is this why Paul speaks so often in his letter about principalities and powers?

[21 : 40] I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, that you may know the power at work in those who believe in accordance with the working of the strength of his might which God brought about in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand, far above all rule and power and authority.

Our struggle, he reminds the Ephesians, is not with flesh and blood, it's not with other human beings, but against rulers, against the powers, against this world force of darkness, against the spiritual force of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Now, one more thing to know about Ephesus. It was proudly a center for the so-called imperial cult. the worship of the Roman emperor.

Worship of Caesar as a god was the glue that held this city together and it permeated every level of society and so the city decided to build another temple and dedicated it to quote Emperor Caesar Augustus son of God.

Emperor Caesar Augustus son of God. Caesar Augustus was being worshipped as the warrior god who had imposed unity and order on the world.

[23 : 05] The rule of Augustus was thought to be so significant that the calendars needed to be changed so in 9 BC the city council of Ephesus voted to restart its calendar with the birthday of Augustus.

It was claimed that Augustus had ended the time of suffering and that as one of the city council members announced Augustus quote restored the form of all things to usefulness close quote.

The decree spoke of Augustus as a savior Soteric and as a god Phaos and his birthday was quote the beginning of glad tidings for the world.

His birthday the beginning of glad tidings for the world. Now this word glad tidings in Greek is the word euangelion or evangel the word that we translate gospel.

The birth and reign of Caesar Augustus was the beginning of the gospel for the cosmos. What had come to the world in Augustus was an eternal reign of peace.

[24 : 16] You see why now I'm using this term alternative reading of reality? Those who come to faith in Jesus Christ are going to come to understand a different gospel a different glad tidings and as a result are going to come to a different understanding of power and authority and unity and victory and relationship and even another understanding of time.

So that's Ephesus. Now Paul in Ephesus. Paul lived and worked in Ephesus on two different occasions. The first time in 52 AD he was only there for a little while.

We're not sure exactly how long. Three months maybe. And the second time he was there from 53 to 56 AD and stayed a little over two and a half years.

At first Paul taught and dialogued in the local synagogue but when he came up against hardened hearts as Luke puts it in Acts Paul moved out of the synagogue to the school of Tyrannus.

Apparently one of the philosophers in Ephesus decided that he didn't need his hall for certain parts of the day most people think it was during the hot part of the day and so loaned it to Paul.

[25 : 39] And so Luke tells us that Paul met with people every day in the hall of Tyrannus for two years. He taught people every single day for two years.

That's what I want to do. Every single day. Teaching the word. During his two and a half year stay in the city many people were one to Jesus and his gospel.

And as a sign of their authentic conversion and of their intent to really follow Jesus as disciples people broke with this Ephesian obsession with magic and the occult.

Many of them brought their magic and occult books into the city square and had a book burning in the city square. Luke tells us that they then counted up the price of the books and it came to 50,000 pieces of silver which is the equivalent of 50,000 days wages.

The gospel broke through in that city and freed people from deception and oppressive lies. Paul's preaching of the gospel also spoke into this obsession with Artemis Diana.

[26 : 53] The silversmiths of the city made their living in large part by making little Diana dolls with all these breasts on them which were then used in the worship of this goddess of sexual fertility.

Now as the people were one to Jesus and his gospel sales of these dolls started to fall. And one of the silversmiths a man named Demetrius was so incensed that he started a riot in the city.

Would the people were so incensed in our cities. Luke says the whole city was thrown into confusion and so they gathered the city in the theater and they dragged Paul's companions there.

Now cooler heads prevailed and so nobody was killed. But the city was never the same. That's because the gospel will always start fiddling with the idols around which the cities build themselves.

Paul then left Ephesus. Two years later he finds himself in jail. And he has to now live in jail for five more years.

[28 : 07] First in Caesarea on the coast of Syria and then after a harrowing trip across the sea in Rome. And it is from Rome in 62 AD that Paul then writes the letter to the Ephesians.

I Paul prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles I therefore the prisoner of the Lord exhorts you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called.

Note not prisoner of Caesar but prisoner of Christ Jesus. Alternative reading of one's own reality.

Okay now the opening section just a few more minutes. Paul begins by reminding the Ephesians of who they are. He calls them saints or holy ones and he calls them believers.

Saints does not mean perfect ones at least not yet. Saints simply means set apart ones. Something is made holy by the holy God by simply God claiming it as his own and setting it apart for his own purpose.

[29 : 21] Paul reminds the Ephesians right from the start of his letter that the holy God has grabbed hold of them and set them apart for his redemptive purposes in the world. Put Ephesians glasses on and we discover that you and I are holy ones.

Paul reminds the Ephesians where they live. Yes in emphasis but more essentially in Christ. Believers in Christ he says Paul will use that phrase or its equivalence 36 times in this letter because it's the essence of his practical theology in Christ we live and move and have our being in Christ.

Put Ephesians glasses on and you and I discover we have a new address in Christ. Paul reminds the Ephesians what they have received.

Grace to you and peace. Grace and peace. In Christ set apart ones. Saints receive grace and peace.

Grace grace unmerited favor something you can never earn nor need to earn God's free choice to be wholly disposed toward our good and peace well-being soundness wholeness shalom as Paul would say in person.

[30 : 44] The word grace would especially ring chords in the souls of Gentiles since the greeting grace to you was normal for Greeks and Romans. The word peace would ring chords in the souls of Jews because peace to you was the normal greeting for Hebrews.

Grace and peace to you a multicultural greeting for a multicultural people. Put on Ephesians glasses and we discover that you and I are recipients of God's unmerited favor and wholeness.

Paul reminds them of who the God of the gospel is. From God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ. In and because of Jesus his father has now become our father.

We too have become sons and daughters of the father Jesus knows and loves. God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

God Lord. Those are amazing words come from a man who lives most of his life as a Jew because as a faithful Jew he would every day say the so-called Shema. Hear O Israel the Lord is our God the Lord is one.

[32 : 02] It is the Jewish prayer. But look what Paul has done with it. In light of his encounter with Jesus in light of what he has learned in Jesus Paul changes the Shema. Hear O Israel the Lord is our God one Lord.

Yes one but not solitary not alone Lord and God grace and peace to you from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ put on Ephesian glasses and you and I see the living God in a whole new way.

And Paul points the Ephesians to the heart of the gospel Lord Jesus Christ a new Kurios has moved into town and he is building a new temple.

God has installed him as sovereign on the throne of the cosmos. God is building a very different empire with a very different kind of emperor.

Lord Jesus Messiah. And the letter the apostle and prisoner of Christ Jesus writes to the holy ones in Ephesus is all about navigating this alternative reading of reality.

[33 : 26] It's all about making sense of and then walking in this alternative reality centered in Lord Jesus Christ.

with these new glasses on we are in for quite an adventure. Let us pray.

we thank you oh lord that you knew Ephesus so well and Laodicea and Athens and Rome and all the other cities and you brought the gospel to those very different places and the gospel broke through and the gospel changed the city we thank you that you know where we live you know this very well you know the people of the city you know their needs and their longings and their fears and we pray that this same gospel will break through in new wonderful ways so that the lord

Jesus Christ becomes the defining issue of our lives amen amen Amen.