

09/15/2019 - Ephesians

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- [0 : 0 0] The following sermon is from Grace and Peace Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Grace and Peace is a new church that exists for the glory of God and the good of the northeast suburbs of Hamilton Place, Collegedale, and Ottawa.
- You can find help more by visiting gracepeacechurch.org. Let's turn to God's Word together. We're going to continue on in our study that we're going to be looking at this fall in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.
- And the passage that we're going to look at today is actually a pretty unique passage in all of biblical literature. It's really robust. It's complex. It's beautiful.
- In fact, this entire section that's printed in your bulletin, in English, we break it up into a lot of sentences. But in Greek, the way Paul originally wrote it, it's one sentence long.
- It's 202 words. Can you imagine what your English teacher would have done with that? Eugene Peterson calls this, he says that it's like a waterfall, a tumbling cataract of poetry.
- [1 : 0 9] The words and the images just come and hit you over and over and over again. And there's a real sense of the vast, cosmic, universal horizons that Paul is excited to talk about.
- He seems to be particularly taken up with the beauty and the majesty of who God is. In fact, it kind of reads like somebody who is going to the Grand Canyon for the first time and they stand on the side and they take it in and it's awe-inspiring.
- And then they turn to their blind uncle who's come with them and they try to put it into words. And they just can't quite grasp the beauty of what they're seeing. That's what this passage kind of sounds like to me.
- So let me read from Ephesians chapter 1. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even 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 for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace with which he has blessed us in the beloved.
- [2 : 3 0] 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, making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.
- In him, we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.
- In him, that's in him is in Christ, you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Amen. Let me pray. Father, this passage is huge. It's overwhelming. There's so many images and ideas and thoughts, and we can't possibly mine the depths of it.

But Father, may we be like a child that can splash on the edges of the deepest of pools. We can see something of the bottom of the majesty and the wonder and the mystery of it, even if we can't plumb the depths.

[4 : 01] Father, send your spirit to be with us as we look at it, we pray in Christ's name. Amen. So one of my favorite storytellers is an author named Walker Percy.

I don't know if you've ever heard of him. He's a Southern writer. He has all these like quippy little phrases that I think are really funny, and I like to read some of those things. Here's one of the things that he writes.

He says that you can get all A's and still flunk life. I love that. Maybe you high schoolers, that's encouraging to you, that if you're not getting all A's, that doesn't mean you'll flunk life.

You can still succeed. So I like Walker Percy. And so this week I've been looking at one of his books that he wrote a number of years ago. It's called *Lost in the Cosmos*. The subtitle is *The Last Self-Help Book*.

And he kind of says it tongue-in-cheek because it's not really a self-help book. In fact, he's not offering a whole lot of help at all. He is basically trying to describe the lostness that people feel in our modern day.

[5 : 04] The sense of discomfort, of lostness. In fact, he describes this, he calls it the modern malaise, which I love that word.

The modern malaise. One of my friends calls this the meh attitude. You know that, how many people do you know that it just seems like they just kind of go through life feeling a little bit meh?

He writes this. This is one of the quotes in there. The main emotion of the adult American who has had all the advantages of wealth and education and culture is disappointment.

Work is disappointing. Marriage and family life, even for the people who are most committed to traditional family values, Christians and Jews, is disappointing.

School is disappointing. Politics is disappointing. Even the churches are disappointing. Social life is disappointing. Isn't that ironic?

[6 : 06] That so many people feel such a pervasive disappointment in life. You know, despite the fact that there has been such a dramatic rise in technology and in affluence in our modern world, we aren't happier or more engaged people.

You know, our lives, you know, whatever station of life you live in, in this area, you live a better life than anyone else in the history of the world.

You have air conditioning and heating in your house. You don't have wild animals who get into your home. You have health care that is at least comparable, that is the best in the world or comparable to the best in the world, no matter what the politicians say.

You have the best life you can imagine. You have one of these in your pocket that allows you to see any other human anywhere in the world right now.

And yet, despite the fact that all of our technology and affluence is growing, our souls are shrinking. You can see it in the suicide rates that have been going up so much so that in America, life expectancy has gone down the last three years.

[7 : 26] You see it in the opioid crisis in our rural areas in America. You see it in the lonely faces of the elderly who sit in homes. You see it in the Snapchat photos of our teenagers.

You see it all over the place, this sense of disappointment. We're more connected. We're more powerful. We're more knowledgeable than we've ever been. But we're less in awe than we've ever been.

But the Apostle Paul wants you to be in awe. He wants you to grab your attention and pull your eyes to the bigger horizon so that you don't miss the forest while you're looking at the trees.

He wants you to see that God's story for you is bigger. It is more powerful. It is more certain than you think that it is. And that's what Paul is talking about here.

The remarkable thing about what Paul is doing here is that Paul is writing this letter from prison. He's been imprisoned. And yet, what you hear from Paul are these moments of awe and beauty and wonder and the majesty of God while he's sitting in a rat-infested prison.

[8 : 43] So here's what he's saying. He's saying three simple things. He's saying that the center of the story is God the Father. It's very Trinitarian. The center of the story is God the Father.

The power in the story is Jesus and his life and death and resurrection. And the certainty of the story is the Holy Spirit. So I just want to look at it under those three headings.

So the center of the story is God. You remember the story of Copernicus, right? Not the story. The person, Copernicus. He lived around 1500. He was the big scientist and astronomer.

He was the one who forced the world to reckon with how it thought about the relationship between the earth and the sun. Remember, before Copernicus, everybody assumed that because you stood on the earth and you saw the sun rise in the morning and set in the evening, that that's the way that the world worked.

That you had the earth, which was small, and you had the sun that was moving around the earth. The earth was at the center of the universe. Everyone thought that.

[9 : 50] Copernicus came around and said, no, no, no. Your perspective is all wrong. It's the other way around. The sun is at the center of the universe and the earth is revolving around it. And it changed the world.

Just that little perspective shift changed everything, right? It made possible Newtonian physics. It made possible space travel. It made possible modern astronomy. It made possible all kinds of other scientific progress.

That one simple change. Paul is saying something similar here. He's saying that God is at the center of the story of the world and at the center of the story of your life.

Look at what he says in verse 3. Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Paul starts here with the big picture. That God, in his infinite power, in his infinite wisdom, in his infinite holiness, has chosen to save people.

[10 : 56] Did you see that? Even 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 for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will.

He chose salvation. And he didn't have to. God was just fine before he made humans like you and me. And he would have been fine without us.

And yet, he chose to do this. He had made this amazing creation. And the very pinnacle, the crown of the creation was what? It was you and me.

It was humans. And what did the humans do? The crown of creation? We turned against the creator. We turned away from him. We ran away. We went in rebellion and selfishness and sin and turned away from his story and didn't acknowledge him.

And yet, in the mass of that sinful and rebellious humanity, what did God do? He entered in. In Christ for salvation. You can sum up the entire story of the Bible.

[12 : 02] God created the world. God loves the world. And God is going to rescue the world. That's the whole story of the Bible.

He's created it. He loves it. He's going to rescue it. And that's the fundamental idea behind these two words that we see here that cause so much trouble. Election and predestination.

Now, look, if you're not a Christian, you may not be aware of this insider conversation that Christians have about these two words. These are super controversial words. They've been hotly debated since at least the year 400 and probably before.

St. Augustine was battling over these words. And the reason is, is because they seemingly hold a contradiction. On the one hand, Paul is saying that everything in the world is happening according to God's purposes, his election and destiny.

And yet, the passage also talks about people believing and people having control and choosing things. How can God be both infinitely powerful and humans have a sense of choice?

[13 : 09] How does that happen? Well, I need to say at this point that you may have guessed this, but I would not have, I would not have initially chosen to select a controversial passage for the second week of a church plant.

It's not generally the way you do things. You know, you don't invite somebody to your house and then as soon as they walk in the door be like, hey, we're talking politics now. You know, you don't want to get to the controversial stuff when you're just getting to know somebody.

That's not how things work. But here's the thing. It's just right here in the Bible. And it came right up here. And Ephesians is this magnificent book that we ought to be looking at and studying.

And so we, I want this to be a church that values God's word. We're committed to God's word, to letting God's word speak and to wrestling with what it means.

Now, we don't hide the fact that grace and peace is a Presbyterian church in which Presbyterians believe these doctrines, which a lot of people don't.

[14 : 17] But here's the thing. Again, we're not all Presbyterians. The people who have started, helped start this church, you know, there's a lot of Presbyterian folks, but it's not everybody.

It may not even be the majority of people, of the families that are involved. We have people coming from all over the place. I didn't actually grow up in a Presbyterian church. I grew up in a charismatic denomination.

And then I went to college and I started hanging around with these Presbyterian folks. And my mother thought I had lost my mind. She was very worried about me. But here's the thing.

When they started talking about these things, I had never heard people talk about the Bible with such wonder and awe.

And I never heard people talk about grace the way that these people talked about grace. And so I've been hanging out in this camp since then.

[15 : 17] And here's the thing. You don't have to agree with me on these particular issues to be a part of grace and peace. We've got, this is not a place where we're telling you everything that you have to think and be like us.

This is a place where you can ask questions and wrestle with the Scriptures and let the Scriptures speak. So we have a pastor's forum after the sermon or after the service every week for our adults while our kids are doing Sunday school.

I'll tell you more about it. But that's a place where you can ask whatever question you want to ask. There's a text number in your bulletin. You're welcome to text me a question if you have it. I would welcome that.

We can talk about that. But here's the thing. This passage that we just read is not primarily about predestination. It comes up. They're just Bible words. We don't need to be scared of them.

But it's not primarily about that. The big picture that Paul is trying to get you to see is that God is at the center of everything that you are seeing and reading.

[16 : 15] This is a passage about God's majesty and God's eternal power. God is at the center of all the movements of history.

God is at the center of Paul's life in such a way that Paul can say, even though I'm sitting in a rat infested jail cell, God is at the center of this. And Paul wants you to see that.

He wants you to see that God is at the center of things. And why is he at the center? This is where it's beautiful. Look back at verse four. He chose us in him before the foundation of the world.

Why? So that we should be holy and blameless before him. He's at work making you the way you should be.

How did he predestine? In love. He predestined us. Why? For adoption as sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will.

[17 : 16] What that's saying is, Paul is saying, God is at the center of the story of this world. He's at the center of the story of your life because he is passionately at work making you to become exactly the person that he wants you to become.

And that frankly that all of us want to become. We want to be accepted as children. We want to be loved. We want to not have our faults be the most important thing about us.

We want our lives to be lives of grace and forgiveness and joy. You see, this truth, if you can see this reorientation like a Copernican revolution in your own mind, that you are not the center of the story anymore, but that God is.

If you can begin to see that, here's what's going to happen. It'll change the way that you see your life. You know, you might feel like your life is an accident.

You know? Your work is not what you want it to be. Your relationships are not what you want them to be. Things are not working out the way that you hoped they would, the way you thought they would, the way that you want them to be.

[18 : 33] And you really resonate with Walker Percy saying, yeah, it's kind of disappointing. Your church isn't even what you want it to be. To see it, though, that in the midst of your disappointments, God has not left you alone.

Your life is not an accident, but it is in process. God is doing something and he's working something in you and in all the parts of your life to bring it towards some glorious conclusion.

What that means, what Paul is saying, we can extrapolate. Paul is saying it is cosmically impossible for your life to be any better than it is right now because God's purpose for you is being enacted now.

And it's headed somewhere. And boy, doesn't that change the way that we think about our disappointments? Doesn't that give you a sense of perseverance and difficulty?

A sense of gratitude for the things that you have? That's what God wants to show you there. So God, the Father, is the center of the story. The power of the story is Jesus.

[19 : 42] Verse 7, he starts off, In him, which we could say in Christ. So one of the details of this passage is this little thing, In Christ or in him.

There's 11 times in just these verses that Paul uses that kind of construction. Why? What's Paul getting at? Well, I think what he's saying is that the story of grace that God is weaving in you and in this world is being accomplished by our being brought into Christ.

There's an organic connection between us and who Jesus was and is. It's kind of like this. Have you ever watched one of those naturalization services when people become a U.S. citizen?

You know, they're pretty, they're really meaningful. You see these people from all over the world that you have no idea of all their stories. But you know that they're pretty incredible. And then they come and they go through this process and they become U.S. citizens.

And all of a sudden, they go from being aliens and strangers to being part of the story. Even though they didn't have anything to do with the story before that moment.

[20 : 58] They didn't write any of the words of the Declaration of Independence. They didn't fight in World War II as part of the greatest generation. They didn't do any of the things that make America, America.

And yet, they receive the privilege of being a part. It's the same with each one of us. None of us did those things. And yet, we have the privilege of being a part of this.

That the story, the grand story that we are a part of, they get to become a part of. And that's what Paul is saying when he says we are in Christ. That the story of Christ is now a story that we are brought into.

You know, Jesus didn't just come as kind of like a sideshow. You know, like a sale. You know, hey, it's Labor Day sale. 50% off. If you just want to take advantage of what Jesus has done over here, that's great for you.

If you don't, no big deal. That's not at all what's happened in Jesus. When Jesus came into the world, it changed everything for everyone. Whether they acknowledge it or whether they don't.

[22 : 08] Listen to this. In Him, what do we have? 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's saying that in the story of Jesus. In His life and in His death. In His resurrection.

In His ascension. These blessings come to us. And we are part of that story. Look at verse 9. And then it says this. This is interesting.

Making known or revealing to us the mystery of His will. According to His purpose which He set forth in Christ. As a plan from the fullness of time.

What's the mystery being made known? To unite all things in Him. Things in heaven and things on earth. That's interesting. The mystery is that in Christ things would be united.

[23 : 07] Now we're going to talk about the mystery. Because this is Paul's big ideas. That there is this unfolding mystery that's being revealed. That he's talking about in this book.

And we're going to talk more about that. But here he's saying that the mystery is that there's a uniting happening. Last week we talked about the uniting of two irreconcilable groups.

Or groups with irreconcilable differences. Jews and Gentiles became united in the church. But here he's talking about something bigger. It's more cosmic in orientation.

I think what he's saying is that there's something about the fabric of the world that has been ripped apart that's being put back together. You know when sin entered the world.

We all of a sudden were alienated. You know from the garden. Adam and Eve weren't with God anymore. They weren't in God's presence in the same way. We are not in God's presence in the way that we would want to be.

[24 : 05] We are alienated from God. We are at war with other people. We're alienated from other people. We're alienated from ourselves. Depression and anxiety and fear and insecurity.

There is this brokenness between the way things should be and the way that they are. What Paul is saying here.

This is so cool. He's saying that when Jesus came and was raised from the dead. He did something in history by which the world cannot be the same.

It's not just a thing that happened. Because in the history of the world death reigns over everything. But if there is an occasion where death does not reign anymore.

That changes things. It changes the fundamental fabric of the world. And what he's saying is. Is that when in the story of Jesus. He is putting back together all the things that have been broken.

[25 : 04] The distance between the heavens and the earth. The difference between soul and body. All of these things are being brought back together in the story of Jesus.

There's incredible power here. You know what that means for you? Is that for you and me. Our lives are of cosmic importance.

Our life is being played out at this level of God working at the fabric of the universe. Of what makes everything go.

Your life is that important. Francis Schaeffer was fond of saying that for God there are no little people.

There are no unimportant people. We live in a world that because Jesus has been raised from the dead. What that means is that every life has the potential to be a part of this redemptive story.

[26 : 03] In a new way. To be put back together. To be something that they cannot be on their own. Every person has that potential. Every life. There's no little people.

There are no little people. There's no unimportant person in this world. And you're one of those. You may think that you're just kind of floating along.

You're living this kind of middle class suburban life. In a cookie cutter neighborhood. Where everything is kind of just the same. And you're just going to live out your days. And you know.

Have a nice funeral. That's depressing. What Paul is saying is. Your story doesn't stop there.

You are part of something that is of cosmic importance. That is being played out in the world right now. Okay.

[27 : 00] I need to move on. The center of the story is God the Father. The power of the story is the Son. Jesus and his story. And the certainty is the Holy Spirit. I mean.

You know. Reading through this. This passage has such richness and good news. You should go. And if you are an industrious person. More industrious than me.

You should go and memorize this. Because it's amazing. In fact. Scholars think that this was probably a hymn. That the early church sang. Or at least poetry that they all knew.

But how do you know that it's actually true? You know. If you're not familiar with the church. You might hear that and say. Okay. That actually sounds kind of appealing. But I don't actually think it's true.

How do you know that it's true? Well. Helpfully. Paul tells us. He says. Look at verse 14. The end.

[27 : 57] He's talking about the Holy Spirit. The promised Holy Spirit. Who is the guarantee. Of our inheritance. Until we acquire the possession of it. To the praise. Of his glory.

The Holy Spirit is the guarantee. There's something certain. There's something that will happen in the future. And yet. It's. It's reality is certain. Because of the Holy Spirit.

He's saying that the Holy Spirit. Is something like a down payment on a house. You don't have full possession of it. But you do have ownership. You have ownership of this story.

Of God. Because the Holy Spirit has come. To seal these things. He uses the work of. The language of being sealed. Do you see that in verse. Verse. In 13.

In him. You also. When you heard the word of truth. The gospel of your salvation. And believed in him. You were sealed with the promised. Holy Spirit. What does that mean to be sealed?

[28 : 54] We use that language in baptism. You know. That something. Outside of you. Happens to you. Which changes your insides. You know. That. That it. You. You're. This outside.

Sign. Is sealing something inside of you. I like to think of it. As like a tattoo. Right. People get tattoos. Because. They. Something central.

Has happened in their life. And they want to be able to remember it. They want it to be something. That they'll never forget. And so they. They. They paint their body. They ink their body. That's a similar idea.

To what's happening here. Is that. He's. Paul is saying. The Holy Spirit. Has been tattooed on your soul. He's. He's. Sealed you. In some way. So that you would know.

That this is true. And we. You can see this. Whenever there is belief. In him also. When you heard the word. And believed. Hearing and believing. Are evidence of the Holy Spirit.

[29 : 51] Many of you have. Heard this kind of stuff before. But you don't believe. Because. Let's be honest. Christianity is crazy. Crazy. I mean.

It's crazy. We believe. That a Jewish guy. 2000 years ago. Was actually God. That he died a death. That was sufficient. For millions.

And billions. Of people. And that he was raised. To new life. Truly raised. To new life. Never died again. Was ascended. And now lives.

In some other dimension. Wherever the heavenly places are. And. Reigns. Right now. Over the world. Is the king. Who will return. One day.

And who will make everything. Right. As it should be. That's what Christians believe. If you don't believe that. You could be forgiven. I mean. You know. Like. I get it.

[30 : 44] It's crazy. But. The work of the Holy Spirit. Is what opens your heart. To be able to see this. If you believe this. Even at the smallest.

Of levels. What that is. Is this. Evidence. Of the certainty. That the Holy Spirit. Is at work. In you. And you should trust. That certainty.

And you should follow. That certainty. And if you've been a Christian. For many years. You should look back. On that initial. Those initial times. Of certainty. And see that.

That is the Holy Spirit. That has been at work. In you then. And if he was at work. In you then. He will continue. To be at work. In you now. Now. Here's the thing.

If you build your life. On this story. Father. Son. And spirit. God's story. It's going to change you. In this world.

[31 : 40] Of malaise. This world. Of meh. Of disappointment. That all of us. Live in. One. You'll be able. To find a significance. That transcends.

Your circumstances. No matter what. Your circumstances are. You'll be able. To find a faith. That's going to become. Sweeter. And more dynamic. Than you've ever.

Experienced before. You'll. You'll find. That there will be. Gratitude. That will replace. Your unhappiness. You'll be able. To find. Awe. And wonder. In a way. That you have never.

Been able to find. If you build your life. On this. Story. When I was a kid. I grew up in Dallas. When I was a kid.

We would go to Six Flags. The original Six Flags. By the way. In Dallas. And we'd go. With our youth group. Or I'd go. With my family. Sometimes. And my favorite ride. When I was like in.

[32 : 33] You know. Fifth and sixth grade. Probably. Favorite ride. Was the log ride. Remember this? It's kind of. You know. It's. You get in this boat. It looks like a log. You go on this little. Kind of lazy river thing.

But then you go up. One big hill. And down. And you make this. Huge splash. And I thought it was great. I loved that ride. But I didn't like it for the ride. The best part about the log ride.

Was after it. Because you got out of your boat. And you went. And you went up on that little bridge. That went over the river. And you stood there. And waited for the next boat. To come down. Because when the next boat.

Came down. It splashed you. And you were drenched. From head to toe. It was awesome. When you're fifth and sixth grade. That is like the best thing ever. And so if my mom wasn't there.

Because my mother would not let me do that. But if. As long as my mom wasn't there. Me and my friends. We would go up. And we would just stand on that bridge. And we would get soaked. Over.

[33 : 26] And over. And over. And over. Over again. And we walk around the rest of the day. With our squeaky shoes. And our. Our clothes. Just stuck to us.

In the hot Texas heat. It was awesome. That's what Paul is trying to get you to do. He's throwing. This stuff at you. He's trying to.

He's trying to soak your soul. With the gospel of his grace. Saying that God. Even though he didn't have to. God. The one who created all things.

Has entered into the story of this world. To transform it from the inside out. And bring life. To you. And to me. And to our communities. And to our countries.

And to this world. You know. The antidote for the disappointment. Of the lives that many of you live. Is to be soaked.

[34 : 21] Over. And over. And over. With this goodness. You know. By the end of the day. Your clothes will dry out. You know. Walking around Six Flags. They'll get dry again.

And we'd go back. Two. Three. Four times. As many times as they'd let us on there. Because we wanted to just be soaked. In that goodness. If you build your life.

From this story. With God at the center. You won't be disappointed. Let me pray. Father.

We pray that you would help us to see this. In all of its beauty. And its glory. That Christ might be lifted up in our midst. We pray in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.