

09/08/2019 - Ephesians 1:1-2

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- [0 : 00] 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 out more by visiting gracepeacechurch.org. All right, listen to how this letter to the Ephesians begins.
- We're just looking at the salutation here. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Amen. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for the fact that we get to slowly walk through passages of the Bible and we get to see what it is you have for us.
- And I pray that you'd be with us this morning as we look at this passage, that we'd grasp it and we see you high and lifted up, that we would see your glory. We pray it in Christ's name. Amen.
- [1 : 12] So one of the things that happens when you plant a church is that people have all kinds of questions. And so I have probably a couple dozen times had somebody ask me some version of this question.
- Why in the world are you planting a church? I mean, aren't there enough churches in this area? Aren't there enough churches in Chattanooga? I mean, Chattanooga is one of the most highly churchd places in our country.
- Aren't there enough? Why are you doing this? And so I answer with various ways. Sometimes I say, well, you know, you've seen the population growth and so there are more people, therefore we need more churches.
- But I'll even go further sometimes and say, you know, a church like this, a smaller body that's getting started, provides a place for people who have not been regularly a part of a church.
- This is the kind of place that they find it more easy to connect. Sometimes I'll even go a little bit further and tell them that all the research will tell us that people who have never come to faith in Christ before most often find faith in a place just like this because there's space for them to ask questions, to not have their lives together.
- [2 : 26] There's space for them to be known in a new way. But here's the thing. I know that for most of the people who ask that question, there's something deeper going on.
- Most of the time, the question that they're really asking is not, why are you planting a new church? They're asking, why in the world is the church important? Why should we bother with church anyway?
- And that is a really good question. I wish people would just ask that question because that'd be a really good conversation. Why do we bother with church? Maybe you've thought that. I wonder if my kids thought that when we picked them up and moved them from Texas to Chattanooga to plant this church.

I wonder if you thought about that while you were standing in the mirror getting ready this morning. Why are we doing this again? I wonder if you think that every time you give money to the church. Why do we bother with this whole thing called the church?

It's really, it's a good question. In a place like Chattanooga, I'm making the assumption that most of you have had some interaction with a church. You know, maybe you grew up in one or you got married in one or you raised kids in one.

[3 : 38] Some of you, I know, have served in a church and loved a church for years. Some of you have been hurt in church. Some of you gave up on the church a long time ago and this may be your first time back in the church in a while.

Thank you for being here if that's you. Eugene Peterson is one of my favorite authors and he writes about the book of Ephesians and here's one of the things that he says. He says that the church is God's advertisement to the world.

The church is God's advertisement to the world. If that's the case, that's not a very good ad campaign. You know, I mean God's ad agency might need a little bit of help because if you just read the news, you can see that the church is a mess a lot of the time.

There is so much brokenness and we don't have to work very hard to find it and we could stand here all day and beat up on the church but the problem with that, in the midst of all that brokenness, the Bible presents the church as having something beautiful about it.

In fact, it calls it a mystery. Paul uses the language of mystery a number of times in the book that there's a mystery about the church. What does he mean? Well, he means this, that the beautiful, that you can get a beautiful and clear picture of who God is and what he's like in the broken mirror that is the church and it's a mystery.

[5 : 05] How can that possibly happen? Well, that mystery is what the letter to the Ephesians is all about. It's the mystery that in the everyday realities of a church just like this, the mundane, broken lives that gather together on a Sunday morning and throughout the week, that in a place like this, you can actually see the glory of God clearly.

How in the world can that happen? Well, it's really, at the end of the day, that's the fundamental answer to the question, why should we bother with church?

There's plenty of reasons to give up on church. Why should we bother with it? Well, because in this place, with all its realities, something transformative and transformational can happen right here.

And it happens in the lives of individual people. It happens in the lives of whole groups. And that's what Paul wants you to see, is that there's something beautiful that can happen here.

And it provides a really compelling vision for a new church. I mean, if we're going to be a new church, why do we want to just have a new church out here? We want to be a church that captures the best of that mystery of God's work in our midst.

[6 : 21] So that's the compelling vision we want to see. So that's what I want to do, is I want to look at how this mystery is revealed in an individual's life, how it's revealed in a group, and how Paul sets a vision for a way forward.

So that's just what we're going to do. So in an individual life, what does that look like? Well, specifically, you can see the mystery at work in Paul's life. Paul's life perfectly emulates this brokenness and beauty, staggering brokenness and profound beauty.

If you know anything about Paul, he was part of the elite class. He was part of the educated group in Jewish culture. Paul was smart.

He was accomplished. He was taught by all the best teachers around. Everybody knew that this guy was on the trajectory to be one of the great people in society. Problem was, Paul took things too far.

Way too far. In fact, he became a fanatic, what we would call a religious fanatic. He was actually a part of the kidnap and murder of a number of people who didn't buy into his brand of intense Judaism.

[7 : 32] In fact, today, we'd call him a domestic terrorist. Truly. If you checked the Apostle Paul's Twitter feed, it would be a disaster. I mean, it would make all the news shows.

It would be horrible. But Paul had this dramatic conversion. He met the risen Jesus and his life was utterly changed in a moment.

His fanaticism got turned, transformed into this incredible care and concern and love for people who would never do anything for him.

He became a lover of the lower class. Of the people who were not influential. His intensity got changed from a religious intensity.

That intensity turned into a perseverance in the face of really big suffering. I mean, this was a guy who was poor. He didn't live in his home the rest of his life.

[8 : 31] He traveled around the rest of his life. He was imprisoned multiple times. He was beaten a number of times. His life showed forth how out of that brokenness, when God entered in, this beauty became apparent.

He embodied the mystery. It was a life that became stunningly beautiful. You know, one way that God shows forth this reality in Paul is that he gave him a label.

He called him the Apostle Paul. Now, the Apostle is just a technical term for people who met the risen Jesus, who met Jesus. They knew Jesus. And Jesus was the one who commissioned them and gave them his authority to go and to minister in his name and continue his mission when Jesus went back to God.

So what that means is, when Paul writes, he writes with an authoritative tone. He's saying, you should listen to me. And we should, because he's writing out of Jesus's authority.

You know, Paul is not one of these guys that just got onto an online school and now calls himself an apostle. You know, he didn't do this in his backyard pool and say, all right, I'm an apostle now.

[9 : 47] He's saying that Jesus himself has given him authority. And that's a real gift to us. Because we don't like to listen to a lot of authority. But Paul is saying, Jesus's authority is who's been given to me.

I'm an apostle of Jesus. Don't listen to me. Listen to Jesus. And I'm going to tell you what he says. You see, Paul's life went from this incredibly disastrous, broken, horrible thing and became something beautiful and powerful.

Because God has, because God transformed it. I read this poem. It's more of a prayer this week that I think, I just, it really resonated with me.

Here's what it says. It says, oh Lord, deepen my wounds in wisdom. Shape my weakness into compassion.

My envy into enjoyment. My fear into trust. My guilt into honesty. You see, the church is the place where the deepest broken parts of people are brought in and transformed because of God's grace and are given new life.

[11 : 04] They're taken from something that is ugly and destructive and given beauty and glory. You see, that's why we bother with the church. Because we believe that God is at work amongst these people sitting right here in this neighborhood, in this part of the city, doing that kind of individual work in normal people's lives.

He's at work. Individually. I hope you want that kind of work in your life. I want God to do that in me. I'm not the guy I want to be yet.

Are any of you? If you are, this is not the place for you. This is the place for people who want God to desperately transform those broken places in them and bring something beautiful from them.

So, individually, he's at work. He's also at work in a group's brokenness to change it to beauty. Now, remember, who was Paul writing to?

He was writing to the Christians who lived in this town called Ephesus. Actually, this is a city. They didn't gather like us. They didn't have church buildings. They were more like our missional community groups.

[12 : 11] They gathered in groups of 20, 30, 40 in homes all over the city. Multiple churches in Ephesus. And they would have taken this letter and passed it around to the various Christian groups.

And Paul had arrived in Ephesus about 10 years before he's writing this. And when he got there, he established a church. He met people.

He planted a church. He stayed with them for three years. He raised up elders and other pastors. And he left them well cared for. And he went out. And he had spent the last six, seven, eight years traveling around the Roman world, starting new churches in all these other little cities.

And leaving them in charge, leaving elders in charge of each of those places. And so now he's writing back to them after a couple of years. And at this time, Ephesus was the third largest city in the Roman world.

Third largest, which meant it had multiple hundreds of thousands of people. It was only smaller than Rome and Alexandria in Egypt. It was placed on the mouth of a river right in Asia Minor.

[13 : 14] So it was like a port city. People would come up. They'd stop there. They'd send goods up into the heart of Asia Minor, Turkey. And then they'd move on. So Ephesus was a wealthy.

It was a strategic city. It was also a really religious city. The main feature of the city was this temple. In fact, classical writers called this temple one of the seven wonders of the world.

They put it on par with the pyramids in Egypt. It was the temple to the goddess Artemis or Diana. And it was like the center of cultural life for the Ephesians.

Kind of like the way that, like the Statue of Liberty is kind of the center. It takes the New York spirit in some way and embodies it.

That's what this temple was for them. The people rallied around it. They worshiped there. But they also, it just represented the religious flavor of the whole city. They had other little temples. They had statues to various deities.

[14 : 14] One of the things that they had, this is super interesting, is that they had the Roman emperors would have their own little temples so that people would go worship the emperors.

So they were mixing politics and religion. We're getting all intermingled together. Isn't that interesting? Sounds a little familiar.

And yet, in the midst of this pluralistic kind of wealthy, crazy place, the church was flourishing as a minority.

As just a bunch of people who got together in their little churches. In fact, there were riots against the Christians while Paul was there. It was a place that was unfriendly to the church.

And yet the church was flourishing. Now, Paul, we have 13 letters that the apostle Paul sent to various churches. This is the only one. The only one where he's not writing because of some problem in the church.

[15 : 15] All the other ones, they've got all kinds of problems. There's fights. You know, people taking advantage of things. You know, women not getting along. Like, it's a mess. This is the only one where there's not one issue like that.

That he's just talking in general terms to encourage the church. And that should tell us something. You know, that should tell us that Christians, the Ephesians are doing well at this time in spite of their cultural circumstances.

And that tells us that Christians don't need to be in cultural or political power to witness to the mystery that God is at work among them.

To see the kind of transformation that needs to happen. In fact, if you look around the world right now, the church is growing in places that are least hospitable to Christianity. The church is exploding in China as China is clamping down on religious freedom.

The church is exploding in the slums of the global south. You know, there are more people getting converted in Iran right now than have been converted in the last 1,000 years in that land.

[16 : 29] There are conversions happening all over the place in places where the church is marginalized. You know, I find it odd that Christians, a lot of times in America, talk a lot about we want to return to the New Testament church.

I wonder if they realize that the New Testament church, the power of the New Testament church, was their faithfulness in marginalization.

Was their faithfulness in extreme poverty. Was their faithfulness in the midst of oppression and pain. Was their unimportance in society.

And in that, they were utterly dependent upon God. I mean, that's a scary place to be coming from where we are right now. See, they realized that they needed God's Holy Spirit to be with them if they were going to be able to accomplish anything.

And that's where their power was. Their power wasn't in their simplicity or their purity or anything like that. Their power was in the fact that they were faithful in the midst of difficulty. And the Ephesians are one of those people.

[17 : 42] Now, in saying that, that doesn't mean that the Ephesians were perfect. You know, actually the Ephesians are going to show up later in the Bible. In the book of the Revelation.

What happens is, is there's seven churches that are condemned and the Ephesians are one of them. And you know what they're condemned for? They lost their first love. All the great stuff that's happening with them here.

In about 20 years, they're going to lose it. We get to see the whole arc of the Ephesian church. From when it's planted to now the glory days of it to when it's struggling. And it's kind of a cool thing to be able to see that.

They forgot God's message of grace. But see, the apostle Paul knew they weren't perfect. He knew that they were in process. Do you see, did you notice how he talks about them?

He says, Paul, an apostle of Jesus by the will of God. To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus. He calls them saints. He does this in a lot of his books.

[18 : 41] Have you ever noticed that? That Paul calls these people saints. Not the kind of saints that like have statues on European cathedrals. You know, where people, you know, they do miracles. And, you know, they're these superpower Christians.

You know, that's not what he means. He's talking about normal, faithful people. And he's calling them saints. It's people like you. And he's not being sarcastic either.

You know, like my young adult friend who posted something recently. They posted, hey, I got up today and made my bed. Not all heroes wear capes, y'all. Okay, fine.

No, Paul's not being sarcastic. He's being absolutely sincere. That the people who persevere in the church in all of its messiness, in all of its brokenness, the people who are faithful in the midst of that are the saints of God.

They're the people who have God's unique blessing upon them. Not because they are immune or they are perfect or they are without brokenness, but because God in his grace has wanted to lavish his love right upon them.

[19 : 53] My dad, maybe your dad was like this. My dad was the kind of guy who loved doing the lawn when I was growing up. Like he'd spend all day Saturday outside.

He's edging. He's mowing. He'd have the hose out there, watering stuff. He's weeding the flowers and stuff like that. And then he'd sit back with a beer and just kind of admire his work in the late afternoon.

And that's what I grew up with every Saturday. And so the first Saturday that my dad trusted me to do the lawn, I remember how I felt. I felt this sense of accomplishment.

This sense of being trusted by my father. Like this was something special to him and he was giving it to me. I felt a sense of dignity. It didn't just build up my self-confidence.

It built up my soul. It communicated something about who I was. I think that's what Paul is doing when he calls them saints. Is he saying, it's not because of how good you are at doing this.

[21 : 02] I'm fairly certain that my dad could have done the yard better than me. But he trusted me. He gave that to me. Because he wanted me to know that he loved me. And that I was in with him.

And that he cared for me. And that's what Paul is saying is happening with the Ephesians. Is God is calling them saints by his grace. And he's bringing them in. Even in this broken place.

Because he wants to show forth his beauty through them. You know, grace and peace. You know, is going to be a church just like that.

If you think that you're coming to grace and peace because it's going to not have the problems of the places you've been before. I'm sorry to disappoint you. Grace and peace isn't going to be a perfect place.

We're going to have all kinds of problems. And you know why? Because we're going to have people with all kinds of problems. And we're going to work through that. And we're going to see God at work in the midst of that.

[22 : 00] But here's the thing. If you look at this and you're kind of skeptical. And you're like, you know, I don't really know why people need to bother with the church.

You're the person I want you to stay. I want you to see. I want you to test and see. Is it possible that a church can actually be a place where there are broken people.

And yet there's something beautiful that gets born in them. Because that's exactly what we're trying to be. Right here, God's grace made clear.

That's the mystery of what the church is. That's why we bother with the church. Is because of that hope and that possibility. Okay, so finally.

We've seen the God is at work mysteriously in the individual people. He's at work in groups. And then you kind of get to the thrust of his message. He wants us to have a rock solid foundation on what he's really trying to say.

[23 : 02] And so he summarizes it with two words. You probably picked up on this. Grace and peace. We stole the name from Paul. Which I kind of like how it's turned out.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. What does he mean when he says that? Well, grace. What is grace? Grace. It's God's undeserved blessing.

It's God's undeserved blessing. When he says grace, what he's doing is he's trying to capture that magnificent, that cosmic, that otherworldly reality.

That the story of Jesus has given us something that is hard to actually believe. Is it true that God would do something in the world to take broken and sinful people and to make them right again?

Can you actually believe that that would happen? The depths of this idea of grace. Grace. We live in a world where we like to talk about we get what we deserve.

[24 : 03] And that is not what the Bible teaches. In the Bible, you don't get anything that you deserve. You get a bunch that you could never earn on your own. That's what grace is.

And Paul, when he talks about grace, he's taking this magnificent, this huge idea, and he's boiling it down. It's like taking a galaxy and putting it into a bottle.

And you get to see its beauty right there. Grace. And peace. Peace. We feel like we're familiar with peace. You know, two armies stop fighting. There's peace.

But that's not the idea that Paul is going for here. That's the absence of conflict. But what Paul is talking about is closer to the Hebrew idea of shalom.

Shalom. That Hebrew idea that all of the human, that all the conditions are right for humans to flourish in the world. All the conditions are there.

[25 : 01] That's what he means. That, so he's talking about grace and peace come together in one place. And that's what the church is supposed to be, a place of grace and peace.

But what does that actually look like? How can that actually take flesh in one little church body? Well, so here's what's cool. Is there's actually a word picture going on.

When he talks about grace and peace, he's doing something cool that you wouldn't normally pick up on. Here's what it is. So grace, charis, is a Greek word. It's dealing with like morality, right and wrong, justice.

Here's what you deserve. Here's what you don't deserve. It's very kind of judicial and vertical. But the idea of peace, of shalom, is a Jewish idea.

And it's dealing with blessing and creation. That God is at work in all of these places. It's not dealing with the harsh realities of morality and justice.

[26 : 02] They're two different ways of talking about what God is doing. Because they represent two different people groups. Two different visions of the world.

Two different ways of inhabiting life. Two different ethnicities. And he's smashing them together. What Paul is saying is, is that the church is the place where these things that seem irreconcilable are brought together into perfect unity and harmony.

He's saying that the church becomes a place of grace and peace. And that provides the opportunity when its brokenness is turned into beauty.

The opportunity is born for unity. For people who would never gather in the same room to be gathered together. In a place where the rich and the sophisticated and the poor and the simple find life together and find joy together.

The place where black and white and every other ethnic identity finds itself joined together in friendship and partnership for the gospel.

[27 : 19] It's a place where conservative and liberal come together and are heard by one another and are in respect and honor and a united vision for moving forward together.

Not always agreeing, but moving forward together in partnership. It's a place where people who seem to have nothing in common find themselves together in grace and peace.

That's the vision that Paul wants for us. And I think it's really compelling. And I think people want to be a part of that. As I've been watching the news this week, I'm sure you've been watching Hurricane Dorian kind of creeping up the coast.

It reminded me of this vacation that my family took when I was in middle school. We went out. We drove from Texas all the way to the Outer Banks of North Carolina, Nags Head and all that area.

Maybe you've been out there. Got hammered. And one day, we were in middle school, so we were all out on the beach. And one day, my mom gathered all the kids and was like, okay, we're going sightseeing.

[28 : 24] We're getting off the beach. We're going sightseeing. And so we went to this place called the Body Island Lighthouse. I don't know if you've ever seen this place. I haven't checked to see how it made it through the storm. It's made it through other storms before.

But this place was pretty incredible, even for a middle school kid like me. It was 156 feet tall, which is pretty tall. And its light, as its light went out, you could see this lighthouse from 19 miles out to sea.

This lighthouse that had been there for over 100 years calling out to ships. Desperate sailors looking for safe harbor, calling out to them and showing them the way to avoid danger, to avoid being shipwrecked, to find their way to safety.

It's calling out. That's exactly what the church is supposed to be, is to be a beacon of God's light. The message that your brokenness does not have to be the most defining feature about your life.

But the beauty of God's redemption by his grace is far more compelling and powerful. And if you'll just come this way, you can see it too. That's what the church is supposed to be.

[29 : 43] And the only way that we can do that is if we become the kinds of individual people that are able to look at the brokenness of our lives and our families and our communities, and then we seek God's grace in the midst of it and seek the mystery by which he brings out life and beauty.

It would be really cool. That's where we're headed. That's where we're going. We'd love for you to be a part of it. We'd love for you to come with us because our city needs that.

Okay, let's stop there. Let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, I thank you for these words from Paul of grace and of peace. Father, I pray that you would help us to embody that in our body.

Give us the strength by your spirit to do that. We pray it in Christ's name. Amen.