

Ephesians 1:1-2

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[0:00] All right, well, friends, imagine one day you come home and waiting for you at your door is a package. It's a gift from a friend, you notice, on the mailing label, and it's a big box.

So you drag it inside, and you open up this big box, and out come the pieces of a brand new bicycle. Plop, plop, plop, plop, plop, plop, plop.

And you can tell it's a pretty nice bike, right? It's got this ultralight titanium frame. It's got these slick wheels. It's top of the line. But as you kind of sort through the pieces of this incredible surprise gift that your thoughtful friend sent you, you realize that something's missing.

There are no instructions on how to put the thing together. You know that this bike is supposed to be state-of-the-art. You can practically feel the wind whipping through your hair as you look at the pieces on the floor.

But you have no idea how it all fits together. Or imagine you've been given an even greater gift. Imagine that some forgotten distant relative dies and leaves you an inheritance.

[1:10] And it's a piece of lakefront property. And not just a piece of property, but on that property are all the materials to build a vacation home. Apparently, they were hoping to build this home but couldn't complete the project.

And so you head out to your newly inherited piece of property, and you see there all the materials stacked and stored and covered. But lo and behold, as you look through everything, there's no blueprint.

There's nothing that tells you how this gift is meant to be put together. There's nothing that tells you how it's meant to be built. Now, why do I start with this illustration?

Because spiritually, Christianity is about receiving a surpassingly great gift.

About receiving the gift of what we call salvation in Christ. But you know, we live in a world where there are competing frameworks and competing worldviews and competing pictures of the good life.

[2:18] There are lots of options out there for you if you're out to construct the good life. So it's not as if we've just sort of lost the instructions, but there are lots of instructions that fall out of the box.

And we're not really sure which one to pick. And it seems that what we need, as those who have received this incredible gift of salvation in Christ, what we need is something like a blueprint.

Something like a blueprint for how this gift is meant to be put together. For how its pieces all connect. For what it looks like and what it feels like when it gets lived out. And not just individually, but in our life together as the church.

And the book that we're going to be studying this fall, we're starting a new sermon series tonight. The book that we're going to be studying this fall and actually on into the winter and into the spring.

The book of Ephesians is actually just that. The book of Ephesians is something like a spiritual blueprint. So if you want to understand what the core of Christianity is all about.

[3 : 26] If you want to see how a lot of its pieces fit together. If you want to know how to build your life in light of what Christianity is all about. If you're curious just what Christianity is and what it does.

Then Ephesians is a great book to study. And that's what we're starting today. So if you haven't done so already, turn with me to the book of Ephesians.

That's page 976 in the Black Pew Bibles there. Page 976, the book of Ephesians. Now as you turn there, you'll see right off that the letter of Ephesians, the book of Ephesians is a letter of Paul the Apostle.

And if you kind of scan over it quickly, if you just flip the page, you see that it's pretty short. It's just six chapters. It's something you could probably read in one sitting.

If you had a good stiff cup of coffee and you were awake, you could probably just plow right through it. But tonight we're just going to look at the opening couple of verses. You'll see in the sermon card, the little blue card in your pew that we're going to kind of walk through.

[4 : 34] You'll see how we'll break it down in the coming weeks if you want to sort of follow along week by week. But tonight we're just going to look at Paul's opening verses. His greeting in verses 1 and 2. So let me read this for us.

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.

Well, let's pray together as we consider this passage. Father, we do pray for just that, your grace and your peace as we come to your word now.

Lord, many of us here have been students of the scriptures for some time. Lord, some of us perhaps are completely new. But God, we thank you that because you're a living and active and real God, you can meet us and teach us and show us wonderful things.

And what you've given us here in the Bible. So we pray that tonight that you'd help us to understand. And in understanding to know you, God, and in knowing you to be really changed in our relationship with you.

[5 : 48] And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Okay. Well, okay. This opening is roughly how all of Paul's letters begin, if you were to scan through.

And this is actually how most ancient letters in general began. From so-and-so to so-and-so and then some kind of blessing, right? But you know, the more that you study Paul's letters in particular, the more you realize that Paul packs into his opening lines often some of the main concerns or the main themes of what he's going to say in the rest of the letter.

And in just a minute, we're going to spend, you know, the bulk of our time tonight looking just at how Paul does that here in these opening verses to get a sense of what the book of Ephesians is all about.

But before we do that, you know, it's worth pointing out that if we were to go ahead and we were to sort of read the rest of the letter, we would actually notice something a bit peculiar about the book of Ephesians.

The first thing that we would notice that's a bit peculiar is that this letter does not seem to be addressing a particular need or a particular crisis in this particular church.

[6 : 59] Now, if you've read some of the other in the New Testament, think about some of Paul's other letters. In Galatians, he's battling some false teachers. In Philippians, he's responding to a generous gift that the church has sent him, who are partners with him in ministry.

In 1 and 2 Thessalonians, he's answering some questions about the Lord's return. In 1 and 2 Corinthians, he's dealing with all sorts of issues and problems. If you want a little snapshot into that, you can check out the podcast from our morning service over the last year.

We looked at 1 Corinthians and all of the crises and issues that Paul dealt with there. But what's very interesting is that here in Ephesians, there doesn't seem to be a crisis. There doesn't seem to be a pressing need that he has to address.

Rather, it seems that the content of this book is... Well, I hesitate to say it's general because general sounds really boring, right?

And Ephesians is anything but boring. Rather, the content of Ephesians is... I mean, how are we going to put it? It's universal. It's like the core of everything. In fact, if you're a student of Paul's letters, you notice that Ephesians is very carefully constructed.

[8 : 07] It's sort of written in beautifully wrought language. It doesn't feel like something that's polemical that Paul's just ripping off to meet a need. No, it seems like he's taken his time to construct this thing.

It feels sort of like a beautiful blueprint. And the second thing you notice if you read through the rest of the book that's kind of peculiar... ...is that Paul doesn't seem to let on that he has any intimate knowledge of the church in Ephesus.

He makes very little mention here of his relationship with them. And again, that's very unlike many of Paul's letters. Often, Paul is addressing particular people by particular names throughout his letter.

I plead with Euodia and Syntyche to agree in the Lord. That's Philippians. I mean, that's pretty direct, right? That shows a pretty intimate knowledge of the people in the congregation.

And it's particularly surprising here in Ephesus that he doesn't make any kind of personal mention because we know from the book of Acts, chapter 19, that Paul actually spent literally years ministering in Ephesus before he wrote this letter.

[9 : 13] He had an ongoing, long-term relationship with this church. And yet, you would read this letter and it feels like it could be written to anyone. Third peculiar thing about this book.

And it's actually found in the second half of verse 1. Look back at the second half of verse 1. We read there, To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus. Now, notice, there's a little number 1, superscript 1, next to faithful there in our text of the ESV.

Do you see that? That's telling you to look down in the footnote. And if you look down in the footnote, you read there that in some of the New Testament manuscripts that we have of this book, the words in Ephesus are omitted.

They're not there. And in fact, it's that way in some of the oldest manuscripts that we have. Okay, well, what does that mean? Well, I think as we put all these peculiar pieces together, and many New Testament scholars have come to the same conclusion, it seems pretty likely that this book of Ephesians originated as something like a circular letter.

Something that Paul composed not just for one church, but for many churches. And that's why there isn't just one name there. That there are copies that exist without a city name, because they could be sent to any city.

[10 : 45] Now, if that's true, if Ephesians is some sort of circular letter that Paul wrote to be distributed broadly among the cities, that's a really cool idea.

And here's why. Because if that's true, then what we have in the book of Ephesians is the Apostle Paul, one of the greatest minds of the early church, trying to distill the essence of his message, trying to get to the heart of Christianity, trying to get down to the bare bones of the gospel, and fit it into a power-packed letter, this short, explosive letter that churches all over could benefit from.

In other words, he's writing a blueprint, not just for the church in Ephesus, but for all of us. To the saints who are in New Haven, and are faithful in Christ Jesus.

So let's take a few minutes then, and see how these opening verses highlight some of the important themes that we're going to see in the rest of the letter, this letter that was meant not just for Ephesus, but for all of us.

First, our blueprint for Christian life and doctrine in the book of Ephesus opens with the will of God. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God.

[12:15] Over and over and over in this book, we're going to learn about God's purpose, God's plan, God's will. In other words, what God desires, what God brings about.

Ephesians is going to take us from eternity past, before the foundation of the world, on through the present, and into eternity to come. And along the way, Paul is going to show us what God's heart is.

What the one true creator, God's unfailing purpose is. His sovereign plan. His fatherly will. And what we're going to see is that God's purpose, his plan, his will, is not some cold, abstract, distant thing.

That it's not just the decree of some far-off deity. But it's the burning desire of God to express his glorious grace in the redemption of his lost children.

Think about Paul. As a young man, who was Paul? If we were to read a news article about Paul, the young man, do you know what we would call him?

[13:38] We'd probably call him a terrorist. He was a murderer, a religious zealot, whatever you want to use, whatever words. He hated Christ, and he hated Christians, and yet, what we read here in verse one is that the will of God, the purpose, the plan of God, intervened.

And the persecutor of Christ was transformed in the proclaimer of Christ. The persecutor of Christians became the pastor of Christians.

Friend, I wonder, do you think it's possible for people to change? Or will we always be stuck in the same old ruts, in the same old bad habits, in the same old spiritual deadness?

And not just personally, how about our city? Do you think that things can change in New Haven or whatever neighborhood you live in? Do you think that we could see our city become a place where God's name is honored and loved and praised, and people are freed from the darkness and selfishness and sin and self-destruction that we're trapped in?

It's easy to lose hope, isn't it? It's easy to think that we'll never see renewal or change, either personally or communally. And you know, in ourselves, in our own strength, in our own will, it is impossible.

[15:21] But not for God's will. What we're going to see in our journey through this book is that God takes the things that are dead.

Not just weak, not just faltering, not just in need of help, but the things that are dead and makes them alive. And God takes the things that are far off, that are strangers, that feel like they're lost and gone forever, and he brings them home.

God's will. I hope you want to learn more about God's purpose and God's plan and God's will because, whether you like it or not, it's coming in this book.

But friends, it's awesome. And you want to see it. But let's keep moving. In the rest of verse 1, this blueprint speaks not just about God's will, but it speaks about our identity.

To the saints who are in Ephesus, who are faithful in Christ Jesus, Paul writes. Notice here that we're called saints. And in the New Testament, that word doesn't mean the extra holy and righteous Christians.

[16:39] Saints in the New Testament are not the super Christians who do everything right. No. Saints is a term that Paul uses for all Christians. It's something that's true of all of us. For everyone who's put their trust in Christ, you are a saint, according to the New Testament.

And a saint, biblically speaking, is someone who's been set apart for a noble purpose. Someone who's been set apart for a noble purpose.

And where have they been set apart for this noble purpose? In Ephesus. See right there, Paul says saints who are in Ephesus.

Or we could even read saints who are in New Haven. Right here. Set apart by God for a noble kingdom purpose right in this city.

There's a mission here, you see. We have a calling to inhabit our city, our neighborhoods, our colleges as those who have been set apart for a noble purpose.

[17:47] To shine the light of Christ into the darkness. To call the dead to life. To help bring the strangers home. And to love with the love of Christ. So on the one hand, we're saints in fill-in-the-blank Ephesus.

But we're also faithful in Christ Jesus. We inhabit the city. Yes, we're in New Haven. We're in Ephesus. But we also inhabit Christ. We are in Christ Jesus.

We are in Him. We're united and one with Him. How? How are we united to Christ? How are we in Him? We get how we're in Ephesus.

We sort of live here. We pick up the language of New Haven. Right? Which is one of the things you pick up if you live in New Haven long enough. You say right at the end of all of your sentences.

But how do we inhabit? How do we dwell in oneness with Christ? Well, Paul says here, it's by faith. Faithful in Christ Jesus.

[18:50] And faithful here means not so much. Paul's not talking so much about our trustworthiness or our reliability to do or to accomplish things.

rather it's as if he's saying, he's talking about those who have placed their trust in Christ. Those who are believers in Christ Jesus.

Faith, trust, belief, they're all sort of the same word and concept in the New Testament. So he's talking about those who have been united to Christ through trust, through faith.

who are you? Who am I? Aren't these some of the most foundational questions we can ask? And our blueprint here is saying right from the start that first and foremost, you are through faith in Christ Jesus.

And in Christ Jesus through faith, not works, not family background, not wealth, not status. No. Through the simple gift of faith, you are united to the king.

[19:59] And being united to him, you are a saint with a mission to inhabit your city as an ambassador. So friends, when you wake up in the morning and before the flood of your to-do list comes crashing into your brain, this week, first thing, try reminding yourself of this before your feet even hit the floor.

Remind yourself that you are a child of a king and that you have been set apart for a noble purpose in this place and in this time.

And that first and foremost, you are not what your education level says you are and not what your job title says you are and not what your bank account amounts to.

You are first and foremost, if you've placed your trust in Jesus, you are beloved in him. and this book, as we peel back the layers, is going to unpack that.

It's going to unpack what it means to be in Christ and it's going to do that in stunning ways. I guarantee you that if you haven't studied the book of Ephesians before, you are going to be shocked by what this book says is true of you and true of the church in Christ.

[21 : 29] I guarantee it. And if you have studied the book of Ephesians before and you haven't been shocked, you haven't understood what you've been reading, this book is going to blow your mind about who God has made you in his son.

Third thing, last. This blueprint is about God's will, it's about our identity, and last, it's about grace. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace. Friends, what is grace? In the Bible, grace is undeserved favor. It's favor that you've done nothing to deserve.

And you know, this whole book is structured according to the deep logic logic of grace. It's structured around it. It's a blueprint of God's grace.

And I want to show you how the whole book is structured before we wrap up. How Paul put this whole book together. He wrote it actually in two halves. And in chapter 1, verse 3, look there, we read, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[22 : 48] This is chapter 1, verse 3. Who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Now, next week, we're going to unpack that verse in a little more detail. But for now, notice that that verse is all about what God has done for us in Christ.

And for the next three chapters, Paul's going to unfold all that God has done for us. What he's accomplished in Christ on our behalf. That's chapters 1, 2, and 3, the first half of the book.

Now look at chapter 4, verse 1. Paul writes, I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

And that begins the second half of the letter. Where Paul, having laid this foundation of what God has done for us in Christ, now tells us what our life should look like in response.

How do we walk? How do we live as those who have received every spiritual blessing in Christ? And that's chapters 4, and 5, and 6. So you see how this whole thing is put together?

[23 : 53] Chapters 1, 2, and 3 tell us what's true. And chapters 4, 5, and 6 tell us now what to do. And as I said, that, friends, is the deep logic, the deep pattern of the gospel of grace.

This is the blueprint at its most foundational level. First, God's grace. Then, in response, are works.

You know, we go through most of life thinking this way. Most of our life we go along thinking that if I obey, then God will accept me.

We put works first, then God's favor. And that is the blueprint that nearly all of us build our lives on by default, isn't it?

If I'm good enough, then I'll be blessed. Then I'll be accepted. Recently, I was at my son's preschool. We had this little end-of-year picnic back in May.

[25 : 00] And one of the ladies there, she's a real cool lady, she had this t-shirt on that said, no yoga, K-N-O-W, no yoga, no peace. So if you do yoga, bam, you get peace.

It's that easy. But isn't that kind of the logic that we all live by, right? If you devote yourself to the practice, if you do the work, if you exercise, if you try hard, then as a result of the work that you put in, you'll know peace.

Now, I'm not just picking on yoga because that's what happens in every area of our life. In our work, in our relationships, whatever, we are programmed to think that my acceptance is based on my performance.

If I get a good grade, I'll get a good job. If I make her laugh, I'll get a second date, right? That's how it works. And on and on and on. But Paul is showing us here that Christianity is completely different.

That the message of Christianity is that God accepts us by grace first, apart from our performance, and then, as a result, we obey.

[26:12] Look again at chapter 4, verse 1. Therefore, Paul says, I urge you, da-da-da-da-da-da-da. What's the therefore referring back to? All of chapters 1 and 3.

The grace of God that brings us peace with God. Grace and peace. And of course, the great question is, how is God able to accept us apart from our works?

How is God able to come to us and accept us wholly apart from our performance? Why would God, who is holy and just, extend to you and me grace and peace? Well, again, the answer is right here in these opening lines in verses 1 through 2.

In each of these three little lines that we've read, what do we see again and again? Or rather, who do we see again and again? Who is it that Paul just can't help but mention as he speaks of God's will and our identity and God's grace?

Who's at the center of this blueprint that Paul has constructed for us? Who is it that we should build our lives around and upon? Who is it that this building ultimately is meant to display?

[27:28] Three times in three breaths he's mentioned here. Look again. Christ Jesus. An apostle of Christ Jesus.

Faithful in Christ Jesus. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of what God has done in Jesus, we are made partakers of his grace, his undeserved favor.

When we were sinners under God's wrath, Christ came and stood in our place and died for our sins and was raised again.

God unleashing him from the power of death and sin and unleashing everyone who trusts in him from sin and from death. friend, is there any better gift that you could imagine receiving?

Bicycles are great. A nice piece of lakefront property would be even better. But you and I both know that those gifts fade.

[28:40] they grow old, they lose their splendor, and eventually we long for something else. Even if we get what our hearts desire in earthly things, sooner or later, it's not enough.

But this gift, the gift of God in Christ Jesus, this gift of grace and peace, this gift of knowing God will know no end.

It will never lose its splendor, and it will never lose its power to thrill us. And instead of growing older and older with time, it grows newer and newer into all eternity.

And what we see right here in Ephesians is that this gift is available right now for all who come to God through Jesus Christ and put their trust in Him.

Friend, do you have that gift? And if you have it, do you know what to do with it? In the coming months, this book is going to show us what it is and what to do with it.

[29:55] So keep coming back and we'll keep unfolding this blueprint together. Okay? Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we began our service tonight by confessing that we are forgetful people.

But Lord, we also confess that there are many things we haven't learned about you and about your gift of grace. So we thank you for the book of Ephesians that teaches us the ins and the outs and the foundation of what it is we stand on.

Lord, bless our journey through this book this coming year and help us to grow more and more to the praise of your glorious grace, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.