**Sermons from Ephesians**

By Ted Johnston

**Sermon #1: *Saints and Believers by Grace***

(Ephesians 1:1-2)

Today we begin a series of sermons covering the New Testament book of Ephesians. This series will incorporate insights from Karl Barth, the great 20th Century Trinitarian theologian. This time we’ll cover Ephesians 1:1-2. Here is Karl Barth’s translation:

*Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus and the believers in Christ Jesus. Grace be with you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

These two verses serve as the preface to a letter (epistle) sent to Christians in the city of Ephesus. There is substantial evidence that Ephesians was a circular letter, sent to multiple churches in Asia Minor, the church in Ephesus included.

**Paul, an apostle**

The author of the letter identifies himself as *Paul*, who refers to himself as an *apostle*. The term in Greek originally had a military connotation, referring to a person sent on a military mission with the power to carry it out. He might be sent into enemy-occupied territory to break up a blockade or to accomplish some other mission. In the New Testament, an apostle is an ambassador of Christ—a servant of the kingdom (rule) of God, bearing the message and authority of the gospel. His mission is to proclaim the gospel of God’s grace, and that is precisely what Paul does in this epistle.

**Of Christ, by the will of God**

Paul makes it clear that he is an apostle *of Jesus Christ,* not by his own will, but *by the will of God.* Paul is pointing to the very essence of his life, and the source of his authority. It’s important, in that regard, to hear the title “Christ” with 1st century, Jewish ears and expectations, for “Christ” translates “Messiah,” which to them meant “conquering King.” Messiah was, in essence, a battle cry—a sort of declaration of war coincident with a proclamation of rule and authority. Jesus (meaning Savior) as Messiah, is *Lord*, and thus his name/title points us to the stunning reality of the Incarnation—to the truth that God is *Immanuel—*God with us. This is who God is and this is the message Paul comes bearing.

And note that Paul says his commission and authority as an apostle of this King/Messiah, is “by the will of God.” In saying this, Paul is disavowing any earthly authority—he bears the authority and message of God. Is this as presumptuous as it sounds? What gives Paul the right to say he speaks for God?

Well, Paul is not bragging. Paradoxically, this is a statement not of arrogance or presumption, but of *humility.* Paul well knows that there is a great deal of humiliation that goes with being an apostle of Jesus the Christ. It is true humility that allows Paul to have confidence in the face of all the opposition he faces to live out the mission to which he has been called.

**To saints and believers**

And it is with this humility, borne of confidence in his Lord Jesus Christ, that Paul addresses the Christians in Ephesus, who he first refers to as “saints” and then as “believers.”

The word *saint* is often misunderstood. It is derived from the word “sanctified,” which means “set apart” or “made holy.” A saint is thus a “set-apart one.” This condition is not something we achieve by our works. Rather, it is what God makes us to be, as Barth notes:

God is the one who makes holy what will always remain unholy. And God reveals what is holy as he makes the creature holy. Only the holy God exists in the sphere where God himself is holy and plans to do things for them and with them that they cannot resist; any holiness springing out of human activity would be our own rather than the holiness which is uniquely and completely God’s. Holiness is a relationship with God. This relationship is established by God.

What is Paul saying by calling them saints (holy ones)? He is proclaiming the truth of the gospel of the grace of God by which that which is unholy (fallen humanity) is given to share in that which is holy (the love and life of God). By grace (and only by grace) we humans become something we are not, and cannot possibly become through our own effort.

What is in view here is our eternal relationship with the Holy God made possible by the grace of God. Through this relationship of grace we become God’s possession, his instrument, servant and child.

These “saints” in Ephesus are also said to be “believers.” We must be careful here not to think that “saint” (one made holy) and “believer” (one who has faith) are somehow two different things. Some have thought that being made holy is what God does, and then faith is our response. But that is not Paul’s point. Rather, in his view (made clear throughout his epistles), both being made holy and believing (faith) are the gracious work of God on our behalf. We can no more believe on our own than we can be holy on our own. Instead, God gives us both our holiness (a state of being—our sharing, by grace in Jesus’ holiness) and our faith/belief (our sharing in Jesus’ faith and believing).

Yes, we do have human faith as a response, but as the scripture says, “I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). Our human faith/response is always weak; always inadequate, and Paul is not saying to the Christians in Ephesus that they should rely on their faith—rather he is exhorting them to rely on the grace of God by which they are included in the holiness and faith of Christ. As Barth notes, “faith is just as much a paradox as holiness [it is] the action of the new person in me, the person *I am not… Faith is God’s work in us.*”

**Those who are “In Christ”**

And it is at this point that Paul first uses a phrase in this epistle that, in essence, is his key point: “In Christ.” He uses this phrase over and over in his epistles. Here is what Karl Barth says:

Everything he [Paul] has to say is contained concisely, simply and succinctly in the two little words which are repeated over and over, “in him.” He means that the change is in him, in Christ…. Christ speaks the living word and kindles [in us] living faith….

When we hear the word of truth through [Christ] and are awakened to faith through him, the change in us is as thorough as it could possibly be. We have a new place to stand. We are not merely the sum of what we make of our life. Other people cannot hold sway over us. Our situation cannot determine who we are. This present world subsides and our arrogance and anxiety along with it. God alone remains. He alone is the one who chooses us freely, according to his good pleasure, who calls us and makes us what we are. We are restored. We do not belong to ourselves; we are consecrated to God….

We can certainly do nothing better than to repeat these two little words, “in him” thankfully and humbly and to reflect attentively and honestly about everything which they entail, always with the desire and the longing to say “Yes”—yes to the new man in him—even as we also are new people in him. And through the new people in him and in us, the entire blessing of the heavenly world enters our life!

**Grace and peace are yours**

To these men and women in Christ, who by the grace of God share in Christ’s own holiness and faith, Paul sends a greeting quite familiar in his day (and ours): “*grace and peace*.” And therein is part of the problem, for because this greeting is quite familiar to us, we might read right over it and miss out on the power and importance of what Paul is saying.

For Paul, *grace and peace* is no mere casual greeting—he is setting the very basis for his epistle, which is the message of the gospel, well summarized in these two words: grace and peace. Note that both are from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ given to those, as we saw earlier, “in Christ.” These are spiritual realities that Paul knows to be true of his readers, but he wants them to experience these realities more fully—he hopes for their renewal in the essential truths of the gospel!

By using the word *grace* Paul is reminding his readers that they are not able to take even the first step toward God, not even the smallest baby step! We become saints and believers, not because we will it, not through our efforts, but because God willed it and because he has acted on our behalf (for example, note in Romans 5:5 and 8:28; and 1 Cor. 8:3 where our love for God comes from). By his choice, grounded in his love, God has included us “in Christ”—there is no greater act of grace. None.

By grace (and grace alone), we fallen human creatures who are unable to recognize God, have been recognized by God as his child. By grace, in Christ, God has made us holy; by grace he has made us believers; and by grace God has reconciled us to himself and thus we have *peace* with God. And we can only know about this peace by grace. As Barth wrote, “Peace with God is certainly not an aspect of a certain kind of temperament, human attitude, or school of thought.”

Paul is pointing out what God has done for us, with us and through us by including us in Christ. It is his work, not our own, and that includes his work to both justify and sanctify us. Salvation (the meaning of peace with God), is from start to finish is God’s work, not our own.

Following this important and powerful introduction, in verses 3-14 Paul offers a prayer (doxology) that points his readers to the truth of who God is, and thus the truth of who they are in Christ, by grace.

We’ll look at that powerful passage next time on our journey through the book of Ephesians.

Amen.