

Ephesians 1.1-2

Apostleship, Sainthood, and Grace

If you've ever done land navigation then you know how important it is to start at the right coordinates when you shoot an azimuth to your destination. If you are not in the right place when you start, no matter how straight you walk, you will certainly not be in the right place when you finish. I am directionally challenged, but when I was in the army I was pretty good at land navigation, as long as I had a topographic map, a compass, and a protractor. However, I did wander around in the woods at Fort Polk during one JRTC rotation because I thought I was perfectly following the terrain as I read it on the map from one hill, across a ridge, and into a ravine. Unfortunately I started on the hill next to the one I plotted on the map. The problem is that I did not realize my mistake until I had gone way off course. As scary as that was for me (mainly because I knew I'd have an angry training NCO to answer to for my faux pas), even worse is the theological disorientation many experience because they don't have a sound starting point when they read the Scriptures. Often this happens because people don't read the Bible systematically or orderly. Too many people just randomly open their Bible's for some "devotional" reading, and walk away either puzzled and discouraged, or confident in their misunderstanding of the text. I've found that when we read the Bible as it was delivered, starting with the beginning of a book and reading through to the end, the clues for correct reading are usually found early along the way.

In his opening address, Paul captures key themes of Ephesians. These key themes give us a point of departure for the journey he will take us on—a journey that will explore the unsearchable riches of Christ, the immeasurable riches of God's grace in kindness toward us, the immeasurable greatness of God's power toward us who believe, the manifold wisdom of God, and all of this as it is displayed in the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord. His opening words are like an open door through which we enter into this grand display of the glory of God we call "The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians." This door is framed by three truths that we must accept in order to apprehend the message of Ephesians. First, God is speaking to you through this letter. Second, God sanctifies you by faith. Third, God saves you by grace.

First, God is speaking to you through this letter. Paul begins nine of his thirteen letters with an appeal to his apostleship. Why is Paul's apostleship so important? To put it simply: Paul appeals to his apostleship to let us know that his message is not *his* it is God's. That's not to say that Paul doesn't whole-heartedly believe it. It is to say that Paul did not invent it. He's simply passing on what he received. That's exactly how he put it when he summarized the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15.3: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received"

You see, an apostle is an officially commissioned representative or ambassador of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, the term apostle is used in at least two ways. It is sometimes used in a general way of missionaries, those specially commissioned by the church to take the gospel to the nations. So, for example, Barnabas is called an apostle in Acts 14.14. But in the more common usage, and especially in Paul's usage, an apostle is one chosen by Christ Himself as a witness to His resurrection. Most students of the New Testament are agreed that the social background for the office of apostle comes from the Jewish office of the *Shaliach* which has a similar semantic range in Hebrew to the Greek word *apostolos*.

The *Shaliach* was a servant who was invested with his master's authority so that whatever that servant said or did in his capacity as the *Shaliach*, it was as though his master had said or done it. A telling example of this is found in the sources from 2nd Temple Judaism. A wealthy businessman may have an arranged marriage, but not have the time to invest in a week long wedding ceremony. So rather than offend the family by simply

sending for his bride, he may send his *Shaliach* to stand in his place for the wedding ceremony. Now, if that is not enough, we read on and find that if the *Shaliach* arrives and does not find the bride appealing, he has the authority to call the wedding off and have the betrothal annulled. This is that background of Mark 3.14 which records “He appointed the twelve (whom He also named apostles) so that they might be with Him and He might send them out to preach.” These were separated from the other disciples as official representatives. So, Jesus says to the Apostles, “As the Father sent Me, even so I am sending you” (John 20.21), and “Truly, Truly, whoever receives the one I send, receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives the One who sent Me” (John 13.20). We may hear these words as spoken to us as witnesses for Jesus, but we do not stand in the same position as the Apostles, because we are not eyewitnesses to His resurrection. These men had a unique role in redemptive history as the chosen representatives of Christ to lay the foundation of the church, as Paul indicates in Eph 2.20 where he says the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone.” The apostolic office ended with the deaths of those eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Christ. Those who claim this office for themselves today either do not understand the uniqueness of the NT office of apostle, or they are charlatans, hoping that no one will investigate the NT to test the legitimacy of their claims. The apostolic gift does not need to be repeated, because it was foundational, narrating historical truths and their interpretation by authorized eyewitnesses. Since the events of the life of Christ are not repeatable, neither do we need a recurring gift of apostle. And since their ministry is foundational, we don’t need to keep laying a foundation, we must now build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Thankfully, while the apostles are no longer with us in the body, they did leave us a deposit of apostolic faith in their writings, the NT.

Paul emphasizes the divine origin and authority of his message by reminding the church that he is an apostle who belongs to Christ Jesus. It has been suggested that the order *Christ* Jesus, rather than Jesus *Christ*, places emphasis on *Christ* as a title of Jesus’ Divine and Royal position and authority. The addition of “by the will of God” is echoed several times in Ephesians. In fact, Ben Witherington points out, in his commentary on Ephesians, that the will of God is referenced more in Ephesians than in any other NT letter, and more than any other NT writing with the exception of the Gospel of John (Witherington, 225). Here, in his identification as an apostle, the prepositional phrase “by the will of God” underscores the Divine origin and authority of his message. As he says in 1 Corinthians 9.16-17: “For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship.” Clearly, Paul did not call himself to this office, he was called by God Himself. He was not in business for himself, he was a servant of Christ, but not just any servant, he was a *Shaliach*, and Apostle. In Galatians he makes it clear that his apostleship is “not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead” (Gal 1.1).

Why is all of this so important? I mean, do we really need to spend so much time on the opening words of a letter? Could you imagine waxing eloquent over the words “Dear Josh”? Well, these opening words are important, because in them Paul reminds us that in the writings of the Apostles, the NT documents, it is not the Apostles alone who address us. God Himself is speaking. And, yes, I intentionally used the present tense with imperfective aspect to be clear that not only has God spoken, but He is still speaking through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The Author of Hebrews can quote a Psalm written centuries before he lived, and say “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today if you hear His voice.’” He can say “today” as though the Holy Spirit were still singing that word through the Psalmist’s lips. It’s not just that the Holy Spirit *said* something, but that He is *saying* something. When we read the Bible we should read it with reverence and wonder knowing that God is speaking to us by His Word.

Some people have made the mistake of thinking that the words in red, namely, the words of Jesus in the gospels, are more important or carry more weight than the words in black, or the words of the Apostles. This is absurd. Every word of the New Testament is Apostolic. And every word of the Bible is the Word of God. Some have thought that they could dismiss Paul's teaching about homosexuality, or the role of women in the church, or the relationship of husband and wife, or the government of the church, or his teaching on Jews and Gentiles, and relegate it to some optional Christian teaching, since Jesus did not address these issues or did not expound on them exactly as Paul did. This is a grave error. "If they receive you, they receive Me. If they reject you, they reject Me" (Matt 10.40). That is what Christ said to His Apostles. Not only do we need to be reminded that these are God's words so that we will not disobey them, but we need to know that these are God's words so that we will believe them. Ephesians is full of profound truths about the Christian life and the Christian's inheritance in Christ. The things Paul says here are almost beyond belief. And if these words were not authorized by Jesus Christ Himself we would be wise to question whether they are true. So, before expounding on "every Spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ," Paul assures you that what he's about to say is not merely his opinion, but is the very Word of God to you.

Very briefly, let me summarize from the remainder of this salutation what we have to look forward to in Ephesians. So, first, God is speaking to you in this message.

Second, God sanctifies you by faith. Because of RCC usage saints are often understood as especially pious Christians, people renowned for some feat of spirituality. In RCC theology, saints not only earned enough merit to earn their own salvation, but they have a treasury of merit stored up for our benefit as well. This is, of course, a terrible travesty of the biblical concept of a saint and of the gospel of Christ. No one can earn salvation, much less store up merit for others to use. In this text, Paul joins two nouns together under one definite article to indicate that all true believers are saints. "To the saints and faithful" or, even closer to Paul's intention "To the saints and believers". The faithful are to be understood as those "full of faith" not first of all "those who are trustworthy." So believers are saints or sanctified ones.

Usually, when we speak of sanctification we speak of that progressive work of God to make us more like Christ. We call this "progressive sanctification" because God is making us holy in our attitudes, thoughts, words and actions, little by little. This is what Paul has in view when he says to the Philippians "that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion" (Phil 1.6). This is a wonderful Bible truth that deserves great attention for the Christian life, but this is not exactly what Paul has in view when he speaks of Christians here as "saints" or "sanctified ones" or "holy ones." He uses the same root word as the adjective "holy" and the verb "to sanctify," but here it is a noun that refers, not to the process of being made holy, but to the people who are made holy—the saints. This is what we call positional sanctification. Progressive sanctification refers to the process of God making you more like Jesus. Positional sanctification refers to the position you already have. You have been set apart for God. You *are* holy.

Perhaps the best illustration of holiness comes from the OT ceremonial system. In that system the Tabernacle or Temple was a holy place. This means that it was a structure or building set apart for one use only, meeting with and worshiping God. The Temple was not like the Shriner's club. It was not a place for social gatherings. You didn't rent the temple to have your wedding there. You didn't reserve it for birthday parties or bar mitzvahs. Being a holy place meant that it was set apart for God's dwelling and God's use. One of the reasons Paul can call the church "the temple of God" is because in Christ we are holy, like the temple was holy. We are set apart for God.

How are we holy, and how do we have faith? Paul's answer, as he repeats so many times throughout Ephesians, is "in Christ." God regards us as holy and grants us faith as a gift because of our union with Christ.

As we will see next week, every blessing of heaven is given to us “in Christ.” We will have more to say on this in coming days. Suffice it for now to say that there is no way that God will accept anyone except in Christ. “No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14.6).

Paul will expound on this wonderful reality of being holy and receiving the gift of faith in the first half of this epistle. In the second half he says “be what you are.” Because you are holy, live holy lives. Because you have been given faith, walk by faith. Positional sanctification is the ground for progressive sanctification. In other words, being regarded as holy in Christ does not make a person careless about holy living. On the contrary, being regarded as holy in Christ is the ground for God’s continuing work in us, and the impetus for our pursuit of holiness in all of life. You, believer, are a saint. Think on that!

So the first truth that frames our entrance into Ephesians is that God is speaking to us in this message. Second, God sanctifies us by faith.

Third, God saves you by grace. For Paul, nothing is left untouched by the gospel of Christ. He says, “whether you eat or whether you drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10.31). And here, he demonstrates just how the gospel has saturated his thinking. Paul takes the simple greeting at the beginning of a letter and transforms it with gospel truth. He takes the typical Greek greeting “chairein” and with a slight change in spelling to “charis,” turns “hello” into a prayer for grace. To this invocation for God’s grace on the saints he adds the typical Jewish greeting “peace, to fashion a truly Christian greeting, an invocation for God’s unmerited favor which leads to the fullness of salvation, here spoken of as peace. Grace is the cause of salvation. Peace is the outcome of salvation. The source of this grace and peace is one, as Paul indicates by using one preposition to join the names of Father and Son—“from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

F. F. Bruce remarked that, “The grace which lies behind this salvation (cf. Eph 2.5, 8) is indiscriminately called “the grace of God” (Eph 3.2) and “the grace of Christ” (Gal 1.6); the peace which this salvation produces (cf. Eph 2.14-17; 6.15) is indiscriminately called “the peace of God” (Phil 4.7) and “the peace of Christ” (Col 3.15).” (Bruce, 251). In these words, Paul introduces two concepts that define the gospel throughout this letter. Our salvation is all of grace. Not one bit of our salvation is of works. Not one bit of our salvation can be attributed to man. It is all a Divine gift. Even faith, whereby we receive this gift, is itself a gift (Eph 2.8-9). This grace sent Jesus to the cross to make atonement for our sins so that we may be forgiven and then reconciled to God. This is first and foremost what Paul has in mind when he speaks of the peace of the gospel. But as he explains in his letter, this peace with God also effects peace with others. Through our relationship with God in Christ, we also find wholeness and healing in our relationships with each other. This is true racial reconciliation—when each of us finds our identity in Christ.

Richard Phillips expounds on this peace as first of all peace with God, then peace with others, and then peace within ourselves as God, the Holy Spirit, subdues our sinful desires and implants in us holy desires, consistent with our position as saints. “Peace on earth!” This is the announcement of the gospel by the angel. Peace on earth begins with peace with God.

It is through Christ’s broken body and shed blood that we find peace and healing for the soul.