

The Grace that Enlightens a Dark Place and a Dark Prison (Ephesians 1:1)

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Ephesians has been called: “the queen of the epistles” (Barclay)

“the crown and climax of Paul[’s] theology ... This letter is pure music” (John Mackay)

“a rhapsody on the worth of salvation” (E.J. Goodspeed)

“the most relevant portion of the NT” (Ralph Martin)

The English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge said Ephesians is the most divine composition of man, “the divinest” he called it.

Ruth Paxson called Ephesians “the Grand Canyon of Scripture,” meaning that it is breathtakingly beautiful and apparently inexhaustible to the one who wants to take it in.¹

I don’t think having more than one tour at a time of the grand canyon is a bad thing, and I’m not afraid we’ll ever exhaust the truth of this book no matter how many angles we look at it or paths we take, there’s always more to see. I have no fear that I’ll run out of fresh truths or things to say about this book even though many of you are familiar with it. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has 8 volumes of commentary on Ephesians, which he considered the most majestic expression of the gospel. It’s nearly 3,000 pages of sermons on Ephesians, including nearly 400 pages in volume 7 which is just on Ephesians 6:10-13! One Puritan spent nearly 30 years preaching through the book!!

This book will always have a special place in my heart. I worked for a health insurance company in Woodland Hills and had the privilege of teaching a lunch-hour Bible study once a week there, and the first book I took them through was Ephesians. It was a time when God began working in my heart about full-time ministry to have some part in Ephesians 4. I’ve studied everything I can get ahold of, through seminary, and since. I had the great privilege to teach through this book with a group of young couples from our church, and multiple couples had their first child while we were studying through Ephesians, which has so much to say about families. My co-teacher taught the section in 1:5 on adoption, and his heart was later moved by that to adopt 2 kids from Haiti, and another couple in the group also adopted locally.

One of our dear single friends who was in her late 30’s as I taught through the sections on marriage and children, both desires of hers though she had no prospects at the time for either and with her clock ticking wasn’t sure if she would ever be married or a mom, in God’s kindness within that year she met and married a guy at age 38 or 39 and God blessed her with the ability to have a baby, and then another!

All of that had nothing to do with the teacher, but everything to do with the God who works in our hearts through His Word in His sovereignty, which is on display in Ephesians as clear as anywhere and has changed everything as I came to understand Eph. 1-2. Who knows what God may do as we study His Word in the months ahead – but I’m praying for and aiming for some life-change in all by the same grace Paul had experienced and wished to his readers.

¹ *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus*

Kent Hughes: ‘Ephesians -- carefully, reverently, prayerfully considered -- will change our lives. It is not so much a question of what we will do with the epistle, but what it will do with us.’²

You may not think of how Paul introduces his letters as potentially life-changing stuff ... but all Scripture is inspired and profitable and powerful and in this case every part of this first verse is not a formality but is full of grace before he says “grace to you” in v. 2.

v. 1a “PAUL” – this was not his Jewish name Saul of Tarsus:

- This is the Pharisee turned follower of Jesus by grace, once famous opponent of the church now its greatest proponent
- The one trained by Gamaliel now transformed by grace
- This is the Jewish legalist turned Gentile-loving evangelist
- This is the man who persecuted Christians to the death now preaching Christianity boldly leading to his own death, the former murderer has been changed to a missionary by grace

v. 1b “AN APOSTLE OF CHRIST JESUS”

This was also an expression full of grace for Paul, who in Eph. 4:7 and 12 describes apostles as God’s gifts of grace to His church. One writer explains Paul means at least 3 things in this phrase

‘(a) He meant that *he belonged to Christ*. His life was not his own to do with as he liked; he was the possession of Jesus Christ, and he must always live as Jesus Christ wanted him to live.

(b) He meant that he was *sent out by Jesus Christ*. The word *apostolos* comes from the verb *apostellein*, which means to send out. It can be used [in Grk lit.], for instance, of a naval squadron sent out on an expedition; it can be used of an ambassador sent out by his native country [like Paul in 6:19]. It describes a man who is sent out with some special task to do. The Christian all through life sees himself as a member of the task force of Christ. He is a man with a mission, the mission of serving Christ within this world.

(c) He meant that *any power he possessed was a delegated power*. The Sanhedrin was the supreme court of the Jews. In matters of religion the Sanhedrin had authority over every Jew throughout the world. When the Sanhedrin came to a decision, that decision was given to an *apostolos* to convey it to the persons whom it concerned and to see that it was carried out. When such an *apostolos* went out, behind him and in him lay the authority of the Sanhedrin, whose representative he was. The Christian is the representative of Christ within the world, but he is not left to carry out that task in his own strength and power; the strength and power of Jesus Christ are with him.’³ [all is of Christ, through Christ, to Christ, by His grace, and for the praise and glory of His grace- 1:6]

v. 1c “BY THE WILL OF GOD” – also a phrase full of grace:

- This wasn’t caused by Paul’s free will, it was by *God’s will* that freed Paul from his sin by God’s grace alone
- Paul wasn’t pursuing Christ, he was persecuting Christ, but Christ by grace *was pursuing Paul* on the Damascus road

- And Paul knew and taught the way God saved and called him is theologically the same way God saves and calls all of us, whether it was a dramatic “Damascus” experience, or the saving of young Timothy in a Christian home through a faithful mom and grandma who taught him from his toddler years (2 Tim. 1:5, 3:15), it’s all miraculous amazing grace:

2 Tim 1:9 (NIV) *He saved us and called us not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time [!]*

Whether Timothy (future pastor in Ephesus) or Paul, or us ...
Eph 1:4 **“He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world”**

Not only was it not because of anything we had done or would do, not only was it before we were created, it was before the earth was created! Paul didn’t believe in v. 1 “I am what I am by the will of me or by the choice of me or by the doing of me” ... it was as he said in 1 Corinthians 15:10 *“I am what I am by the grace of God.”*

And so Paul loves to introduce himself like he does in Eph. 1:1 (his letters either have the exact same phrase of his calling “*by the will of God*” or an equivalent), a phrase full of grace that never ceased to amaze Paul that God sought him while he was yet his enemy, and God appointed him by His grace to proclaim grace to others:

3:7 ... I was *made a minister*, according to the gift of God’s grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.⁸ *To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ*

Let’s keep grace amazing and unfathomable and unsearchable and unexplainable as Paul did as we read Paul, rather than making this saving grace simply explained as God’s response to man’s will. It was nothing Paul did to initiate this grace, Paul wanted his readers to know from the get-go of every book he ever wrote, all that he is and all that he has is all by the will of God, from the grace of God, and for the glory of a God *who interrupted Paul’s will to save him* and whose grace made Paul willing to love and live for Christ now.

So don’t fly by these phrases, and don’t fly by the next phrase:

v. 1d **“TO THE SAINTS AT EPHESUS”**

- SAINTS = holy ones, set apart ones (also emphasizes grace because we don’t make ourselves holy, we don’t set apart ourselves, only God can do this by grace through faith in Christ whose perfect holy life and righteousness is given to us as our unrighteous unholy sin was placed on Christ at the cross, and now God actually sees us in Christ as saints!)
- **“AND WHO ARE FAITHFUL”** – this is the human side of it, those who God has saved and made saints have faith (no one is saved without faith) and this word doesn’t mean a one-time or short-term belief, Christians are described in this verse as “faithful” in the sense of they continue in the faith though they continue to sin in this life, perseverance of saints, not by personal works but God’s preserving grace

One Study Bible says: ‘Saints are sinners saved by the grace of God, separated from sin, and set apart for God. They are not sinless, have not attained to certain heights of sanctity, and do not belong to some special religious group ... **And to the faithful** ... [is also just another] way to describe Christians. The word means that they are “believers” in Christ. **In Christ**. Spiritually they are in vital union with Christ enjoying blessed fellowship with Him.’⁴

The Bible uses the word “Christian” 3x and “saints” for believers over 60x – we should use this word more, not just of sweet old ladies, but of all Christians. The more we use biblical terms, the more we’re reminded of biblical truth, who we are, and one of the themes of Ephesians is we need to know who we are in Christ and what Christ has done for us and then live like that reality. Paul is going to spend 3 chapters telling us what God did for us, before he tells us how we should then live in chapters 4-6, and even then it’s not about what *we do for God in our strength*, it’s about what God *by grace enables us as saints/new creations to do in His strength*.

Bryan Chapell said the phrase *saints in Ephesus* ‘in modern terms ... is something like saying ... to the *Christians in Iran* [or maybe born again believers in Saddam’s palace in 1990s] ... or the Evangelicals working at MTV. The phrases do not seem to go together because the challenges to faith in the place these believers live are so strong ... the challenges to faith at Ephesus were so massive ... Even today as you walk the street from the ancient docks into the city, there remains a sign carved in stone that guides will say was used to direct sailors to a brothel [California didn’t invent road signs advertising where to go for all manner of sexual sin!] ... Ancient accounts and continuing evidence amid the archaeological ruins demonstrate that the economy and culture of the entire region were as mired in materialism, sensuality, and idolatrous diversions as any modern city ... The city and its surrounding culture were addicted to forms of paganism both sophisticated and sordid ... Modern scholars debate the degree of depravity present at Ephesus, but we do not doubt the darkness of a culture whose pagan gods were worshipped despite accounts of their craftiness and perversions [or of our celebrity-worshipping culture that not only tolerates wickedness, but thrives to publish it].’⁵

How did God’s grace come to such a spiritually dark place? Before we look at the background of Paul and Ephesus from the book of Acts, before we appreciate where Paul is writing *to* we need to first understand where he’s writing *from*, which also has something to teach us about grace. Paul is not only writing to a spiritually dark place, he’s writing from a literally dark prison probably in Rome, around the year 62 A.D. (time of last chapter of book of Acts).

This man who once imprisoned Christians is now imprisoned for being a Christian, and he also sees this as God’s will and God’s grace. When he could no longer move freely, the free grace of God ministered to him. In Philippians 1:7, when Paul writes to another church, probably in the same imprisonment in Rome as when he wrote Ephesians, he said to the Philippians “***in my imprisonment*** ... *you all are partakers of grace with me.*” (Phil. 1:7).

Paul says “in my imprisonment” (not just in the gospel) I am a “partaker of grace,” and he wants his readers to partake of grace. Paul saw challenges as opportunities for grace from a sovereign God: Eph. **3:1** *For this reason I, Paul, the **prisoner of Christ Jesus** for the sake of you Gentiles — if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace which was given to me for you*

Paul didn't see Caesar as sovereign or even himself as a prisoner of Rome, he saw himself as bound to the King above all Kings who is sovereign over all things, including this unjust imprisonment based on false charges. Paul in his suffering doesn't seem consumed with "poor me" or "why me, I don't deserve jail?" but with "*why has God been so gracious to me, when I actually deserve hell, but He's chosen me and given me, the worst sinner I know, unfathomable grace, and He also lets me be a steward of His grace to others?!*"

May God help us in the study of this book to have more the heart of Paul, who saw his suffering and circumstances as a stewardship, something God entrusted to him, as a platform for grace. Not only a way for Paul to receive grace, but to dispense grace to others. I can think of some godly ladies here with some of that perspective. May God multiply that kind of grace to us ... and through us!

What kind of prayer requests do we give when very sick or in a trial? We may not be in jail awaiting possible execution, but as I look at Paul's one prayer request at the end of his letter (I would probably have given a bunch of different ones at the beginning of my letter from prison), I'm challenged by my lack of grace glasses and lack of gospel lenses in the way I view little inconveniences.

6:19 "*and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel,* ²⁰ *for which **I am an ambassador in chains**; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.*"

You get the idea that if Paul was in a hospital and you asked him how you could pray for him, he'd say the same thing: pray that I would be bold in proclaiming the gospel to the nurses and doctors, and would open my mouth without fear to those without Christ. If you want to pray for me to get well and get out of the hospital, you can if you want, but what I really want prayer for is that I can be a strong witness, speaking God's grace to people worse of than me.

May God gives us that kind of grace to see all of life as platforms to speak of God's grace, whether in pain or in a prison cell, in the hospital or at home on the phone, wherever God has us. Grace can help us keep the focus off ourselves and on Christ. Grace is what liberated Paul and lit up the dark prison so he could start this letter with glorious God-centered jubilant joyful praise (1:3-14). And as Paul writes to the Ephesians "*grace to you*" (1:2a) he can't forget how God's grace came to you in Ephesus the first time, how grace had liberated many in the bondage of idol worship and occultism, and how grace had lit up that dark place as it did his dark prison.

Acts 18:19 *They came to Ephesus, and he left them there [Priscilla and Aquila, married couple ministry partners]. Now he himself [Paul] entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.* ²⁰ *When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent,* ²¹ *but taking leave of them and saying, "**I will return to you again if God wills,**" he set sail from Ephesus ... [Paul didn't have to do it all] ... ²⁴ *Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, **an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures.*** ²⁵ *This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was **speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John;*** ²⁶ *and he began to **speak out boldly** in the synagogue.**

*But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.²⁷ And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, **the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him**; and when he had arrived, **he greatly helped those who had believed through grace,²⁸ for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.***

- Notice the emphasis on grace in v. 27 as how they believed (not “believed *in* grace,” it’s “believed *through/by* grace”)
- Notice how God’s grace worked through a Christian couple helping this brother whose theology wasn’t perfect, rather than write him off or talk about where he’s off to others, they graciously took him aside privately and humbly helped him understand “the way of God more accurately” (what a great example of a godly couple and impact you can have in your home ministering & helping others minister better)
- Notice also God’s grace in Apollos humbly receiving this

In Acts 19:7 Paul returns to Ephesus, and is working with converts he personally baptized (v. 5).

19:8 *And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.⁹ But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. [apparently shifting focus from outdoor evangelism to private discipleship and training of the believers so they could multiply it and make disciples, cf. 2 Tim. 2:2 pattern]¹⁰ This took place **for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.***

Paul’s pattern was to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles, and it’s important to notice here that the Ephesian church had both (which will become important especially in Ephesians 2). It’s also worth noting that Ephesus was a strategic entry point for the gospel to other major cities in Asia Minor, and people travelling through, so God’s grace could truly travel through the whole region from here. As the light of the gospel went forth in this dark place, it’s also worth mentioning there was opposition by the forces of darkness in the spiritual realm, in this demonic stronghold.

¹¹ *God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul,¹² so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the **evil spirits** went out.¹³ But also some of the **Jewish exorcists**, who went from place to place, attempted to name over **those who had the evil spirits** the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, “I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches.”¹⁴ Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.¹⁵ And the evil spirit answered and said to them, “**I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?**”¹⁶ And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.¹⁷ This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and **fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.**¹⁸ Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices.¹⁹ And **many of those who practiced magic** brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver.²⁰ So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing. [in this occult idolatrous demon-infested dark place]*

... ²⁴ For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis [also called Diana], was bringing no little business to the craftsmen; ²⁵ these he gathered together with the workmen of similar trades, and said, “Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business. ²⁶ “You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all. ²⁷ “Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence.” ²⁸ When they heard this and were filled with rage, they began crying out, saying, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” ²⁹ The city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed with one accord into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia. ³⁰ And when Paul wanted to go into the assembly, the disciples would not let him. ³¹ Also some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his sent to him and repeatedly urged him not to venture into the theater ... ³⁴ when they recognized that he was a Jew, a single outcry arose from them all as they shouted for about two hours, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

Imagine a massive mob of over 20,000+ in the Middle East on TV, a raging crowd of Muslim men have filled an old stadium chanting “Allahu akbar!” [Great(est) is Allah] for 2 hours, getting louder by the hour. There’s Paul in v. 30 wanting to go into the assembly, “let me give ‘em the gospel! What an opportunity! What a crowd!” You have to hold him back! “Paul, you’re gonna get killed! You’d be safer in the Emperor’s coliseum fighting lions than in here with these wild beasts.” (Paul said in Corinthians he battled beasts in Ephesus, probably a figure of speech for these wild opponents). Paul says, “let me go. Let me at ‘em. Let me give ‘em the gospel. God kept Daniel safe in the lion’s den. His Word can hold its own.” Other friends have to send to him, v. 31, repeatedly pleading with him not to venture into the theater. They prevail on him wisely, but that gives you a context of how spiritually oppressive Ephesus was.

Ephesus was basically the capital of idolatry for one of history’s biggest idolatry movements – it was to worshippers of Artemis or Diana what Mecca is to worshippers of Allah. It also became the center of the Emperor cult. There were baths and theatres where all kinds of crassness was common, some things I can’t repeat from this pulpit, some of which is still written in stone to this day. If there would ever be any saints or faithful believers in such a wicked place, it would have to be amazing grace (see 2:8-9)

That’s the context Paul writes the book of Ephesians to, a very dark place that would be soon enlightened by the same grace that gave Paul great hope in writing Ephesians from a dark prison. As the light of his candle in his cell illumined the walls around him, the light of the gospel would illumine Ephesus and all Asia Minor.

Hopefully that brings some light to Paul’s greeting to “the saints who are at Ephesus and faithful in the Lord Jesus. Grace to you.” Even in the darkest of places, whether pagan strongholds or prison cells or your personal sinful heart today, *grace to you* can come if you repent and trust in Jesus as Lord (as Paul says in 20:21 he kept preaching in Ephesus). Great opposition from men and devils can’t stop the unstoppable gospel of the grace of the God far greater than Artemis or Allah, who as v. 26b says are actually “no gods at all.”

It's possible, if not probable, that some of the people first receiving Paul's letter to the Ephesian church were part of the 20,000+ in the theater that day chanting "Great is Artemis" – now they read Paul use the same Greek word *great* in this letter to speak of Christ and His great love for His church (5:32) the true, only heavenly bride. The true gospel would flourish in Ephesus of all places, which became a center of Christian influence for centuries. In 431 A.D. a church council was held there. Its preachers included the mighty Apollos, the Apostle Paul's longest ministry anywhere (3 years), Timothy pastored there many years, and later the Apostle John. 4 or 5 NT books at least in part are to this church (Eph, 1 & 2 Tim, Rev. 2, maybe part of Rom. 15-16).

Let that encourage us in our Ephesus-like culture that is getting darker everyday. We may not have Paul's fearless passion or the eloquence or giftedness of Apollos. But don't underestimate the power of grace working through a couple like Priscilla and Aquila, or the 12 disciples who devoted themselves to God's Word.

¹ As cited by Boice, p. 1 and Hughes, p. 15.

² Hughes, p. 16.

³ W. Barclay, p. 74.

⁴ *KJV Bible Commentary*. p. 2405. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁵ Chapell, 11-12.