

EPHESIANS || The Divine Gift of Gospel Life in Christian Community

Ephesians 1:1–2 || Grace to You

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Pastor Jeremiah Knoop

On Friday this week, I received an article from **The Voice of the Martyrs** talking about the persecuted Christians in India which is under the Hindu regime of their Prime Minister (*Narendra Modi*). They shared the story of a young man named **Ravan** who was swept into the Hindu militia. Part of Ravan's job as a **Hindu Nationalist** was to make India a "**pure**" Hindu nation, which meant eliminating the country of any Christian witness. In exchange for power, money, and alcohol, Ravan spent seven years violently persecuting the Christians throughout India. He anticipated that this is how he would spend the rest of his life, but there was a problem with his plan: he had a Christian mama who never stopped praying for her son! What is Ravan doing today? He's planting churches in India – even though it may cost him his life.

*“God gave me new life, so it doesn't matter even if I die.
I have an immense burden to somehow share the gospel with others.”
~ Ravan*

Today, we are beginning a **sermon series** through the book of *Ephesians* – which was written as a **letter** to the local churches spread throughout the region of Ephesus in the middle of the **first century AD**. The man who wrote this letter was named Paul (**1:1**), and the story of his life is almost identical to the story of **Ravan**.

PAUL'S STORY

As a young man, Paul was known by his Jewish name – which was Saul. And, like Ravan, Saul spent the first years of his adult life persecuting Christians throughout Israel. In fact, in **Acts 7:57–60**, we read that Saul was part of the mob that murdered the very first Christian in the history of the church. A few verses later (**Acts 8:3**) we read that Saul “**made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.**” In the book of **Galatians** (which is another letter that he wrote to the churches in Galatia), he describes how he “**persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it**” (**Gal 1:13**).¹ He hated Christians so much that he was “**breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord**” (**Acts 9:1**). And he wasn't just “breathing” murder; he was also *committing* murder. Towards the end of his life, as he was sharing his testimony, he said, “**I persecuted this Way [Christians] to the death...**” (**Acts 22:4–5**). From his point of view, there was nobody who was more zealous in persecuting Christians than Saul (**Phil 3:4–6**).

This is **the same man** who wrote the letter that we're going to spend the next several months studying. If you had known Saul in his early days, this is not at all the kind of letter that you would have expected to read from him. **1.** Instead of using the name associated with his Jewish heritage (Saul), he uses the name **Paul** (Παῦλος), which means “*humble, small, little, or least*” (**Acts 13:9; Eph 1:1**) – which is maybe not what you'd expect from the man who had devoted his life to climbing the socioreligious ladder all the way to the top (**Phil 3:4–6**). **2.** Instead of being a letter of condemnation against Christians (*like the kind of documents that he was writing when he was still a Pharisee*), this letter was written to encourage Christians in their relationship with Jesus and in their relationships with one another. Instead of breathing murderous threats against the Christians in Ephesus, Paul writes **ones of the most encouraging and life-giving books that you will ever read**. If you were to only read one book this year, you should read Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In just 6 short chapters, Paul describes:

- *the character of our sovereign God... what it means to be saved... what the church is all about...*
- *what the purpose of marriage is... why God made you the way that He did...*
- *how to have victory over the sin in your life... what it looks like to have a relationship with Jesus...*

So, what happened? How does somebody like **Saul** (*the greatest threat against the church*) become **Paul** (*arguably the greatest Christian missionary who ever lived*)?

¹ He writes the same thing in 1 Cor 15:9; Phil 3:6; 1 Tim 1:3.

Or how does somebody like **Ravan** (*a violent Hindu Nationalist*) become a church planter who is willing to lay down his life for the sake of the gospel in India?²

The answer: **grace**. || What is grace (Gr. χάρις)?

Grace is receiving a good gift that you have **not earned** and that you do **not deserve**.

- It's receiving **life** when you deserve death. It's being **pardoned** when you deserve to be sentenced.³
- It's walking **free** when you deserve to be walking death row.

Paul **deserved** to be punished for his brutality against the church. He **deserved** to experience the wrath of God for the way He persecuted God's children. He blasphemed Jesus and totally rejected the message of Christ, and so He **deserved** to be separated from God for all eternity.

Try to consider Paul's past from God's perspective. The Bible describes Christians as the children of God (e.g., **1 John 3:1**). And those who touch God's children touch the apple of His eye (**Zech 2:8**). The Bible says that we can't even begin to understand how much God loves His children (**Eph 3:19**). **But I do know how much I love my own children...** (*I'll never forget the day that God brought Daniel, Aukeem, and Troy into my life or the day the judge declared that they would forever be known as Knoops. And I'll never forget the day that Asher was born. I was the first human being to hold him outside the womb, and I was the first one he saw when he opened his eyes for the first time.*) I love my children... and if somebody were to break into my home, drag my children to prison, and then murder them... my heart would be screaming for justice. Everything inside of me would want to make them pay for what they did to my children.

But here's Paul, and *God doesn't make him pay*. How many children lost their parents because of Paul, yet *God doesn't make him pay*. How many people lost their closest friends because of Paul, yet *God doesn't make him pay*. Why not?

This is a really important question because the Bible tells us that God is a just God – that He always does what is right (**Gen 18:25**); that He never turns a blind eye to sin; that He never lets the guilty go unpunished (**Exod 34:7**); that all His ways are just (**Deut 32:4**) ... and so He cannot let sins go unpunished. Not mine. Not yours. Not Paul's. There must be justice. And for there to be justice, his sins must be paid for. And the Bible says that the cost of sin is death (**Rom 6:23**).

So, how can God be just if He *doesn't make Paul pay* for what he did? **Answer:** By sending Jesus to pay Paul's debt for him. That was the reason Jesus came to this earth (**John 3:16**). That was the reason He became as one of us: fully God and fully man (**Phil 2:6–8**).

- Everything in this world belongs to God (**Psa 24:1**) – every planet, every person, every particle. And so, every sin that we ever commit is ultimately against God (e.g., **Psalms 51:4**). Therefore, God has the right to do whatever He wants with your sin. The Old Testament is full of hopeful promises about what God is going to do with your sin, but the problem is that sin requires death (**Rom 6:23**), and God can't die (**1 Tim 6:16**). So, God can **take** your sin, but He can't **die** for your sin, and so there is no justice. That's God's "*problem*".
- Our "*problem*" is we can't take anybody else's sin. As a human, I have the ability to **die** for you, but I don't have the ability to **take** your sin. I can take a bullet for you, but I can't take *your sin* – because I'm not God. So, even if I were to die in your place, your sin still remains.
- This is why the Bible says that there is no other way for people to be saved than through Jesus (**Acts 4:12**) because, through His incarnate birth, Jesus is **both God and Man**. **As God**, He has the divine right to take your sin, and **as Man**, He has the ability to die for your sin. And that's exactly what He did.

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

~ 2 Corinthians 5:21

² How does **John Newton** (*a man who made his living stealing people from their homeland and selling them as slaves*) become a pastor who wrote the greatest Christian song in history? Grace. Amazing Grace.

³ Grace is being forgiven when you are literally as guilty as hell.

Though Jesus never committed any sin, He **became** sin for Paul. Jesus took Paul's sin, and so Jesus became the murderer. He became the blasphemer. He became the religious boaster. Jesus became all of Paul's sin. Then He went to the cross and paid for Paul's sins – every last one.

On the cross, justice was served for Paul's sin. His debt was paid. In full. For good. Forever. The only thing left now for Paul to experience was grace.

- Jesus took the wrath so that Paul could receive the forgiveness.
- Jesus took the death so that Paul could receive His everlasting life.
- Jesus took the justice so that Paul could receive the grace.

You can read about the day that Paul experienced that grace in **Acts 9**. As Paul is on the road to Damascus to persecute more Christians, he meets the risen Christ, and his life is changed forever – just like **Ravan**. He puts his faith in Jesus. He believes that Jesus is who He says He is. He makes a public declaration of his faith in Jesus by getting baptized, and then he spends the rest of his life telling people the good news of Jesus – just like **Ravan**. God took this *assassin* and made him an *apostle*. He took this *murderer* and made him a *missionary*. He took this *church persecutor* and made him a *church planter*. When you consider Paul's past, all of a sudden, **this little introduction** to his letter becomes nothing short of glorious.

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God...

~ *Ephesians 1:1a*

John 1:3 tells us that our relationship with God has nothing to do with the will of man but with the will of God. Paul didn't choose to be a Christian; **God chose** Paul to be a Christian. And Paul didn't choose to be an apostle; **God chose** Paul to be an apostle. No part of our story begins with us; it all begins with God.

This book was written **by** a man who had experienced the grace of God, and it was written **to** a community of people who had also experienced the grace of God.

To the saints who are in Ephesus and faithful in Christ Jesus:

~ *Ephesians 1:1b*

Some people read a sentence like that and think that Paul must be writing to perfect people. But that's not what the word "**saint**" (ἅγιοις) means, and that's not what the word "**faithful**" (πιστοῖς) means. The word "**saint**" isn't describing someone who is perfect; it's describing someone who has been "**set apart**" for God.⁴ And the word "**faithful**" isn't a description of people who never make mistakes; it's a description of people who have put their faith in Jesus.

Another way to translate this sentence would be: "**to those who have been set apart by God – who live in Ephesus and who have put their faith in Christ Jesus.**" This letter isn't written to perfect people; it's written to people who have put their faith in a perfect Jesus. It's not written to people who are good; it's written to people whose hearts have been captivated by the goodness of God.

We'll talk more about the city of Ephesus as we get into the letter.

~ *Ephesians 1:2*

Paul's very first sentence to the Christians in Ephesus is **Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 1:2)**. And he meant it. If you have a relationship with Jesus, it is not because you have earned it or because you somehow deserve it; it's only because of God's grace to you. And if your soul has peace with God, it's not because of anything you have done (or ever could do); it's only because of what God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ have done for you.

⁴ We see this same word in verse 4 where we read that God chose people before the foundation of the world that we should "be holy".

GRACE TO YOU

“To you”: *all who are in Christ*

What does this mean for us today?

1. It means we can stop trying to somehow earn a relationship with God by being a good person. There are no “*good people*”. There is only One who is good, and He already loves you more than you could possibly imagine (*which is what the book of Ephesians is all about*). It means that God is not waiting for you to get your life in order before you come to Him. He wants you. He shed His blood for you. The only thing left is for you to trust Him with your heart, with your life, with your past, with your eternity, and to confess that Jesus is the King of your life, and the Bible says that you will be saved (***Rom 10:9***).
2. If you know Jesus as the King of your life and the Savior of your soul, then this grace means that you can live your life with a peace that the rest of the world can’t even begin to understand. You can be at peace with the past (instead of living in regret, shame, bitterness, unforgiveness); you can be at peace with the present (hardships, struggles); you can be at peace with the future (upcoming election, the next global virus, relationships, career) because your life is covered in grace. The God who is holding this universe together just so happens to also be your Father and the Lord of your life. You belong to Him. He has wrapped you in His grace, and He is never going to let you go. Not because of how good you are, but because of how good He is.

Trust in His grace. Rest in His grace. Praise Him for His grace. And then ask God for opportunities to share His grace with those around you.

Pray