

"The Life Behind the Letter"

Ephesians 1:1,2

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Whenever we read a book or even a newspaper article, we often understand it better if we know something about the author. For example, a few years ago I read "The History of the American People" by Paul Johnson. Because I know Johnson is a Roman Catholic, it doesn't surprise me he is not as enamored with Jonathan Edwards and the new English Puritans as I am. Because I know he is British, I am not shocked he doesn't share my enthusiasm for the American Revolution, though he does greatly admire our country. Likewise, when I read a sports column in a Minnesota newspaper, it doesn't bother me when it says the Vikings have a good chance to dethrone the Packers as NFC Central champions this season. It is a Minnesota writer! He has to say that! In a similar way, if we are to fully grasp the meaning of a particular book in the Bible, it can be helpful to know something about the background of the author.

During the next few months, we will be exploring the book of Ephesians on Sunday mornings. Though our topical sermons on "Half-truths" has been very beneficial, I am looking forward to this expository series where we will be examining what God says to us through this book and what these words mean for us today. So, who wrote Ephesians? Some of you might say, "God did," and you would be correct. Every part of the Bible is God's word and according to 2 Timothy 3:16 "breathed out" by Him. The book of Ephesians contains the words God desires. However, God did not chisel this letter on a tablet of stone. In fact, the Ten Commandments are the only part of scripture that God wrote without a human author.

The first verse in the book reads, **Ephesians 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus.** The apostle Paul of Tarsus is the one who wrote Ephesians. It is his letter to the church in Ephesus, a city in the Roman province of Asia, or what is now the country of Turkey. I cannot explain exactly how it worked, but in about 60 A.D. Paul freely sat down to write a letter to the Ephesians and the finished product ends up being the exact words God intended. Ephesians is truly both the words of Paul to those first century Christians and the word

of God for people in all places and at all times, including people on the Iron Range in the fall of 2021. Yet, what about this man behind the letter? Some of you are pretty familiar with the apostle Paul, while others may not be exactly sure who I am talking about. Yet, I think a quick overview of his life will help us better understand this letter in the weeks ahead and will also encourage and challenge us this morning. Let's pause and pray the Lord will cause that to happen today.

So, who is this man called Paul? If I asked you to describe your life in one word, most of you would not find that very easy. But I think Paul could do so. I believe he would sum up his entire life, in one word: Grace. He said, **1 Corinthians 15:10a By the grace of God I am what I am.** That is what his life was about, grace. The Greek word for grace, Charis, is found 156 times in the New Testament, and 102 times it is Paul who uses the term. What does the word mean? Well, there are a variety of dimensions. There is a book entitled, "Grace is Not a Blue Eyed Blonde" and I guess that is a good start. Essentially, in the Bible, grace is God's unmerited love and favor, demonstrated in and experience through Jesus Christ. Some of you know the little acrostic defining grace as "God's riches at Christ's expense." That is not a bad definition. What stood out in Paul's mind is that God treated him with incredible kindness, even though he no way deserved it.

A few years ago, the pilot of a passenger jet decided he had to make a belly landing because the plane's wheels would not go down. He radioed the control tower and emergency vehicles lined the runway. As the plane skidded along the runway, the screams of those inside drowned out the sound of the screech outside. Miraculously, however, no one was injured. As the passengers left the plane, one of them said to the flight attendant at the door, "Remember: the rest of your life is extra." She, being a Christian, responded, "It's all extra, sir, from the very beginning." Friends, that is Paul's theme. All of life is extra. "By the grace of God I am what I am," Paul would say, all that I am and every hope to be, I owe it all to God's grace that is mine in Jesus Christ.

Why does Paul have this perspective? Let's look at his life before he knew Jesus Christ. We don't have any first century biographies, but Luke tells us quite a bit about him in the book of Acts. We also have some autobiographical information about Paul in his New Testament letters. When we put everything together, we get a pretty good summary of his life. Paul, then called Saul, was born in Tarsus, a city of maybe 500,000 people, in the province of Asia, which is now modern Turkey. He was likely born a year or two after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. His parents were devout Jews of the tribe of Benjamin and somehow, they had become Roman citizens. Paul received an excellent education as a student of the noted Jewish teacher, Gamaliel. As a young man, Paul quickly became a leader in Jewish political and religious circles. A zealous member of the Pharaoahs party, he became a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Paul was an achiever. He might of have been voted, "Outstanding young man of Israel." He demonstrated great leadership qualities and was devoutly religious. Yet even though Paul appeared to be someone who really had his life together, he was a man who desperately need God's grace.

The first time we are introduced to Paul, his name was Saul. **Acts 7:58b And the witnesses (against Stephen) laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.** Then **Acts 8:1a says And Saul approved of Stephen's execution.** He approved of the murder of an innocent man. After Stephen had been killed **Acts 8:3 Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.** Apparently, his goal is to have at least some of them executed.

Maybe you are starting to see why this man needed God's grace so badly. But should we be so hard on Saul/Paul? After all, he was acting out of ignorance and was sincerely trying to do what was right. Surely God would recognize his good intentions. Yet, in 1 Timothy 1:15 he refers to himself as "the worst of sinners." I think Paul would say something like this: "The fact I persecuted the church of Jesus Christ shows that all my previous service in the name of God was hollow. I was a hypocrite. Even though I was doing many things in the name on God, I never really knew or loved God. If I had, I would have

recognized Jesus was His son. Why was I so devoutly religious and so zealous in what I did? That was not really for God, it was for me. I was concerned less about God's greatness that I was my greatness. I was a man desperately in need of God's grace."

Paul experiences that grace in a marvelous way when he meets Jesus, or more precisely Jesus meets him. The story of Paul's conversion is recorded for us in Acts 9. Paul Is on his way to the city of Damascus to arrest Christians. This is not a man searching for God. Rather this is a very religious man whose heart is actually cold and hard towards God. Yet, God's grace breaks through. On that road, Paul's encounter with Jesus Christ literally, literally changes his entire life. He realizes that the Jesus he has been fighting against is none other than the Lord God Himself. Twenty and thirty years later, whether standing before a Roman governor or writing a letter to fellow Christians, he never tires of telling how he first experienced God's grace when the Lord Jesus him met on the road to Damascus.

Paul's experience of God's grace does not end with his conversion, however. Let's consider Paul's life after he became a believer in Jesus. I think when Paul realized how wrong he had been in persecuting the church, he would have been grateful for any role God would assign to him. If the Lord had said, "Paul, I want you to scrub floors the rest of your life," I think he would have gladly done that in Jesus' name. Yet, God didn't ask him to scrub floors. He called Paul to be an apostle, to be His representative to the entire world outside of Israel.

Now, Paul did not have an easy life as a Christian. He went through a lot more physical pain than I can even imagine. Being an apostle was often not fun. Paul spent considerable time in prison. Someone said when Paul arrived in a new town, instead of checking out the motels, he checked out the jails, because that is where he would eventually end up. Yet, despite all the challenges and hardships of being an apostle, Paul would not have exchanged it for the world. His relationship with Jesus, being in Christ, meant his sins were forgiven. Instead of facing death, Paul looked forward to eternal life. He was free from the self-destruction of his sin and God had given him a life full of meaning, purpose, and yes, joy, a joy that transcends circumstances. As an apostle, Paul

was a man who, each and every day, breathed the grace of God. It was God's grace that made each day worth living.

Well, that's a brief look at the life behind the letter to the Ephesians. I hope in the weeks ahead this will help us understand the central role that grace plays in Paul's view of what being a Christian is all about. Now there are a number of lessons we could learn from Paul's life, but I just want to focus on one today. It is Jesus Christ. As we sometime say, there is no one, no matter how good or wonderful, who doesn't need God's grace, and there is no one, no matter how evil and nasty, who is somehow beyond the reach of that grace. I think we find both those truths reflected in the life of the apostle Paul.

First, his life, pops the bubble of those who think, "Hey, I am a good person, I don't really need this grace stuff." Remember, Paul was a very devout and religious man before he became a Christian, but he was certainly not pleasing God or experiencing God's salvation. He was relying on very flawed righteousness of his own, not the perfect righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Of course, Paul was immersed in Pharisaical Judaism, but sometimes even people who appear to be devout Christians miss out on God's grace. Relying on the righteousness of their own. They assume their religious devotion and service will somehow earn God's favor and guarantee a place for them in heaven. They fail to realize God is only pleased with those redeemed by grace, through faith, in Jesus Christ alone. Now, through out Ephesians we will see that the church is very important for every Christian. However, I know folks who focus on the church, church rituals, church traditions, church activities rather than on the head of the church, Jesus Christ. These people often make the mistake of thinking that it is not Jesus' life, death and resurrection, but their own church involvement that somehow makes them right with God. It is tragic when people miss out on God's grace and salvation, because they are trusting in a church, rather than the Lord Jesus to save them. Paul reminds us that even the most devoutly religious are in need of God's grace through Jesus.

Now, in our culture it is not just religious people who don't think they need God's grace. Sometimes I hear, "If there is a heaven, she will be there for sure, because she is such a good person."

It doesn't matter if that woman goes to church, professes to be a Christian, or even believes in God. The assumption is being "a good person" is all one need to do to receive eternal life. What exactly is a good person? Well those who do a lot of volunteer work in the community or are just helpful to their neighbors are thought of as "good people." In some circles, flying a rainbow flag and having a co-exist bumper sticker on your car makes you a good person because obviously you're inclusive. Yet, all of these "good people" are very much in need of God's grace, whether they realize it or not. The bottom line is that good people are never good enough. Our sins, our failure to honor God as we should with our words, actions, and attitudes, means even the "goodest" among us fall short of the glory of God. As Jackie Hill Perry said in a recent article, "Well intentioned sin is still sin, and deserving of judgement." Thus, there is no one who can rely on "righteousness of their own." We all need God's grace and righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ.

Friends, one of my great fears as a pastor is that there might be people who sit in this room almost every Sunday, who seem to be a part of Chisholm Baptist church, but who are relying on their own righteousness and not truly trusting in the Lord Jesus. Friend, if that describes you, you are in great peril. **John 3:36 says, Whoever believes on the son has everlasting life, whoever does not believe will not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.** The reality is you are not good enough to experience salvation without God's grace experienced through trusting in Jesus Christ. Your family members, your friends, are not good enough. No one is. We all need that grace found in Jesus. That is a sobering reality and reminder that we need to make sure we are trusting in the Lord Jesus and that we are encouraging others to do so as well.

Second, the apostle Paul's life reminds us that God's grace is sufficient for anyone, even the nastiest person you can imagine. Paul says, **1 Timothy 1:15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-of whom I am the worst.** Or the New Living Testament I am the worst of them all. Worse than Hitler, Stalin, or your least favorite American politician? Yes, I think Paul would say, "worse." This would not be an objective conclusion. I think the horror that

Paul felt about his own sin prevented him from even thinking someone else may have been a greater sinner than he was. He had zealously persecuted Christians...giving his approval of the stoning of Stephen, arresting people and having them imprisoned and apparently having some of them executed. In the months following the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, no one was a more ardent enemy of the church of Jesus Christ than Saul of Tarsus, AKA the apostle Paul. Yet God's grace was able to reach him, to save him, the worst sinner of all.

Friends, this means two things.

First, no matter who you are, what you have done, or how many times I have done it, God's grace is able to reach and save you. Pastor author Randy Alcorn says a significant point in his Christian life was when he realized that God's grace was big enough to save someone like serial killer Ted Bundy, if Bundy was truly, as he professed, trusting in Jesus Christ as his savior. At first Alcorn didn't like the idea that Bundy could be in heaven, but then he realized God's grace is so amazing that it can extend to the worst of sinners. That includes you. I doubt if there are any serial killers in the room this morning. Yet, there may very well be folks who think that because of their sexual sin, their divorce, their arrest for some crime, their blasphemy, their addiction to drugs or alcohol, or whatever the sin is for which they feel deep shame, they think "God could not possibly forgive me after what I did." Friends, if that is your thought, you are wrong. God can certainly forgive you, and that is exactly what He will do if you turn to the Lord Jesus Christ and place your trust in Him.

Second, this means that people you know who seem least likely to become Christians, are not beyond reach of God's grace. Is there someone in your life that you assume would never become a Christian? Maybe it is the foul mouthed guy at the mine who is always telling filthy jokes, or the devout Muslim nurse at the hospital, or the atheist professor teaching your college biology class, or the woman across the street who is really into wicca, or your brother-in-law who has repeatedly told you, "I just don't want to hear about any of that Jesus stuff." Whoever it is, whatever that person is like, no matter how opposed to Christianity he/she may seem, that person is not beyond the reach of God's grace. And I suspect that each of these individuals is,

from a human standpoint, far more likely to turn to the Lord Jesus than that brilliant first century religious leader who was committed to doing everything he could to wipe out the Christian church. If Saul of Tarsus could become a believer in Jesus Christ, so can any person in your life, including those who seem least likely to become Christians. So, don't give up praying for these people, don't give up looking for opportunities to share the great news of grace with them.

The grace of God in Jesus Christ...everyone needs it and meets the need of anyone. It is truly amazing grace. In the 18th century, John Newton was a slave trader, buying African men and women and selling them in Jamaica and other places in the Caribbean. One of his hobbies was mocking and imitating Christian preachers. He was lost, but then God found him. Unlike, Paul, his conversion was somewhat of a process, but eventually Newton became a believer in Jesus. He then served as a beloved pastor for over 40 years and the last 20 years of his life was an outspoken opponent of the slave trade. Part of his ministry was to write poetry or song lyrics, including what is the world's most well-known and popular hymn, "Amazing Grace." God has used that song to encourage countless people over the past 250 years. May you be encouraged as we sing it this morning.