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SPIRITUAL WISDOM FOR GOD'S SAINTS

Ephesians Overview & 1:1-2

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Ephesians, Lesson 1

Spiritual Wisdom for God's Saints Ephesians Overview & 1:1-2

If you could buy a book that contained a distillation of a lifetime of thinking and experience on spiritual matters by one of the greatest Christian leaders of all time, would you do it? Would you read it and study it and try to plumb the depths of its wisdom? What about if you could read aloud all six chapters of the book in only 19 minutes? I'm speaking about Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Even though Ephesians is so short, Martyn Lloyd-Jones' exposition of it takes eight volumes! He has 37 messages on chapter 1 alone! John Calvin's 48 sermons on Ephesians take up 705 pages. The Puritan William Gurnall in *The Christian in Complete Armor* takes almost 1,200 pages to expound on Ephesians 6:10-20! So there is far more depth in this short epistle than I can begin to understand or apply to my own life, much less to expound on. So as we come to it, we must pray with the apostle Paul (1:17-19),

... that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.

The English poet, Samuel Coleridge, said that Ephesians is "the divinest composition of man." Another writer refers to it as, "the Grand Canyon of Scripture," because "it is breathtakingly beautiful and apparently inexhaustible to the one who wants to take it in" (cited by, James Boice, *Ephesians* [Baker], p. 1). Martyn Lloyd-Jones calls Ephesians "the sublimest and the most majestic expression" of the gospel (*God's Ultimate Purpose* [Baker], p. 12).

BACKGROUND AND OCCASION:

There is an element of uncertainty about the background and occasion of this letter because three of the earliest and most reliable manuscripts omit the words, "at Ephesus" in verse 1. It is difficult

to explain why these manuscripts would drop those words if they were in the original. But without them, the Greek grammar is awkward, implying that some city was designated. Almost all other Greek manuscripts contain the words, so it was in some way associated with that church.

But there are internal reasons why many scholars doubt that this letter was intended exclusively for the Ephesian church. Paul had spent more than two years laboring in Ephesus, resulting in the gospel spreading throughout the entire region (Acts 19:11). He would have known not only the leaders of the Ephesian church, but also many of its members. Yet in Ephesians, there are hardly any personal references and there are some verses that seem to indicate that Paul and his readers were not well acquainted (1:15; 3:2; 4:21). He does not address any specific problems that may be traced to that particular congregation.

Thus many scholars believe that Ephesians was a letter intended for distribution among several of the churches in western Asia Minor, with Ephesus being the major city and church. Colossians and Ephesians have much in common. Both letters, along with Philippians and Philemon, were written while Paul was in prison, probably in Rome. The situation was probably that Epaphras, perhaps the founder of the Colossian church, had reported to Paul in Rome how the church was doing. While there were many reasons for joy, there were also some serious doctrinal problems plaguing the church. Paul wrote Colossians to address these problems, exalting the person and work of Christ.

As he reflected on what he wrote to the Colossians, Paul was caught up with the glory of God's purpose for His church, the riches of His grace toward us in Christ, and how these great truths should effect how believers live. So he penned Ephesians, intending it to be circulated among all of the churches of that region. Peter O'Brien (*The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 57) explains, "He writes Ephesians to his mainly Gentile Christian readers, for whom he has apostolic responsibilities, with the intention of informing, strengthening, and encouraging them by assuring them of their place within the gracious, saving purpose of God, and urging them to bring their lives into conformity with this divine plan of summing up all things in Christ (1:10)."

At the same time, Paul also wrote the short letter to Philemon, pleading for forgiveness for his runaway slave, Onesimus, whom Paul had led to Christ. He sent these three letters—Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon—back to that region with Tychicus, a faithful worker who was with Paul in Rome (Col. 4:7; Eph. 6:21; Philemon lived in Colossae), sometime around A.D. 60-62.

CONTENT AND THEMES:

Ephesians falls into two halves. In chapters 1-3, Paul presents our position in Christ in the heavenly realms, all because of His sovereign grace. The main idea is that God's wisdom, glory, and power are displayed in His eternal purpose for the church, made up of both Jews and Gentiles, reconciled in Christ. After the introduction, he outlines the incomparable blessings that come to us because the Father chose us (1:4-6), the Son redeemed us (1:7-12), and the Holy Spirit sealed us (1:13-14), all "to the praise of His glory." Because these truths are so profoundly important and deep, Paul prays that God will open our minds to comprehend the riches of all that God has given to us as members of the body of Christ, the head over all (1:15-23).

In chapter 2, Paul contrasts what we were before we met Christ, dead in our sins, with what He has done for us by His grace (2:1-10). He raised us from the dead and seated us with Christ in heaven! He wants the Gentile Christians to remember that formerly they were completely alienated from God and His covenant promises, but now they have been brought near in Christ Jesus. He Himself is our peace, who reconciled the Jews and Gentiles into one body through the cross, so that together we are being built into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (2:11-22).

In chapter 3, Paul begins by mentioning that he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles. This thought gives him concern that his imprisonment may cause some of the Gentile believers to doubt God's sovereign control over these trials. So he digresses to show them that God had revealed to him the mystery that had been concealed in the past, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and members of the body of Christ. God's wisdom is now being displayed through the church in accordance with His eternal purpose. So Paul's tribulations were on behalf of the Gentiles, for their glory (3:1-13). This causes Paul again to break into prayer, that

God would, according to the riches of His glory, grant that these believers could comprehend the unfathomable love of Christ, that they may be filled up to all the fullness of God (3:14-21).

Then, in chapters 4-6, Paul shows how comprehending God's glorious purpose for the church and our position in Christ (chapters 1-3) should cause us to live in practical godliness in this world. From 4:1-6:9, Paul describes four (or, five) different "walks" and their effects: the *worthy walk* in the one body (4:1-16); the *purposeful walk* in the one new man (4:17-32); the *loving walk*, which also is a *walk* as children of *light* in this dark world (5:1-14); and, the *careful walk* of wisdom, especially as it affects the family and the workplace (5:15-6:9). He concludes by showing (6:10-20) that to walk well in this evil world, we must learn to stand against the unseen forces of evil by putting on the full armor of God.

Because in chapter 2 Paul described how we are *seated* with Christ in heaven, in chapters 4 & 5 he outlines how we are to *walk* in this world, and in chapter 6 how we are to *stand* firm against the forces of evil. Watchman Nee titles his treatment of Ephesians, *Sit, Walk, Stand* [Christian Literature Crusade]. "Sit" pictures our new position in Christ. "Walk" describes how to live in this world. "Stand" captures our resistance against the spiritual enemy.

In unfolding these marvelous truths, Paul emphasizes a number of themes. One is God and His sovereign, eternal purpose of summing up all things in Christ (1:9-11; 3:11). The rich salvation that He has graciously bestowed on us in spite of our sin is another wonderful theme (1:3-23; 2:1-22). In this regard, the word "riches" occurs five times; "grace" occurs 12 times; "glory" occurs eight times; "fullness," "filled," or "fills" occur six times; and the phrase, "in Christ" occurs 15 times. Because God's gracious salvation and the depths of what it means are incomprehensible to the unaided human mind, twice Paul prays for God to give supernatural understanding into these glorious truths (1:15-23; 3:14-21).

Closely coupled with salvation is that the church as the body of Christ is at the heart of God's purpose (1:22-23; 2:19-22; 3:4-11; 5:25-27, 29-32). Related to that is the mystery, hidden in the past but now revealed, that the church is a new creation, made up of both Jews and Gentiles on equal footing (2:11-22; 3:1-12). This

means that the unity of the church is very important, which is another dominant theme (2:14-22; 4:1-13, 25).

Although there is a great correspondence between Colossians and Ephesians, in Colossians there is only one reference to the Holy Spirit (1:8), whereas in Ephesians He takes a major role. We have received the seal of the Spirit as the pledge of our salvation (1:13-14; 4:30). We have access in one Spirit to the Father (2:18). We are being built into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (2:22). The Spirit now has revealed the mystery of Christ to the apostles and prophets (3:5). The Spirit strengthens us with power in the inner man (3:16). We are to maintain the unity of the one Spirit (4:3, 4). We must be careful not to grieve the Holy Spirit (4:30), but rather to be filled with the Spirit (5:18), to take up the sword of the Spirit (6:17), and to pray at all times in the Spirit (6:20).

Of course, foundational to all of these themes is the centrality and supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ. God has purposed to sum up all things in heaven and on earth in Christ (1:10). Thus we must know Him and His power (1:17, 19). God raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand, far above all other powers, not only in this age, but also in the age to come (1:21-23). Everything in God's dealings with us centers in the person and work of Jesus Christ and our organic unity of being "in Him." These, then, are some of the great themes that we will try to understand in a deeper way as we work through this rich epistle.

Keep in mind (as Lloyd-Jones reminds us, p. 23) that these profound, unfathomable truths were not written to great scholars or theologians, but to ordinary church members. Many of them were slaves. Most of them were Gentiles who were formerly pagan idolaters with no knowledge whatsoever of the living and true God.

Ephesus was noted for its temple of Artemis or Diana, a structure that was four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. It was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Artemis herself was a many-breasted idol, worshiped through immoral encounters with prostitute priestesses. Her annual festival drew much revenue into the city, like the debauched Mardi Gras in New Orleans. When the many new Christians stopped buying silver shrines of Artemis, it led to a riot by the silversmith guild, whose prosperity depended on that business. Ephesus was also a

center for occult practices. When the gospel took root in Ephesus, the new believers burned their occult books, which Luke reports as being worth 50,000 pieces of silver, probably equivalent to 50,000 days' wages (Acts 19:18-41)!

So it was to ordinary Christians from this pagan background that the inspired apostle wrote this letter. He knew that these great themes, including God's sovereign choice and predestination of us before the foundation of the world (which he plunges right into in 1:4-11) were essential for all of us to know and rejoice in if we want to live holy lives in this evil world. So don't dodge them! I find that many Christians avoid the doctrine of election because they cannot understand it or it causes a lot of controversy. So they shrug their shoulders and skip the many verses that state this truth. In so doing, they miss a good portion of the riches that God has provided for their spiritual growth and health.

With that as a general overview and background, let's spend the rest of our time on the introduction (1:1-2). We can sum it up:

God wants us to know who we are in Christ
and how we came to be in Christ.

First, there is Paul, the author of this letter. His description of himself tells us some things about who he was and how he came to be that way. Then, there are the believers. His designation of them also tells us much about who we are and how we came to be this way. Finally, his greeting sums up both how Paul and all believers came to experience this great salvation in which we now stand.

1. Paul's self-description tells us who he was in Christ and how he came to be that way (1:1a).

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God..." (1:1a). As you know, Paul's given name was Saul. He was a Jew, born into the tribe of Benjamin, whose namesake was the first king of Israel. Paul was trained as a Pharisee under the famous rabbi, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his countrymen, being more extremely zealous for his ancestral traditions (Gal. 1:14). He heartily approved and assisted when the Jewish leaders stoned Stephen to death. After that, Paul had ravaged the church, entering homes and dragging off both men and women to put in prison and put to death (Acts 8:3; 9:1).

As he was on his way to Damascus to bring any Christians from that city bound to Jerusalem, God sovereignly intervened in Paul's life. A bright light from heaven suddenly blinded him. He fell to the ground and heard the Lord say (Acts 9:4), "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" When Paul responded, "Lord, who are You?" the Lord said (9:5-6), "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." Paul was not dissatisfied with Judaism. He wasn't considering various religious alternatives. Rather, he was militantly opposed to Jesus Christ and the gospel when (as he puts it in Gal. 1:15-16), "God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles...."

In other words, Paul did not have anything to do with his dramatic conversion and his appointment as an apostle. Rather, it all happened by the sovereign will of God. Paul was fiercely opposing God at the very moment that God literally stopped him in his tracks, blinded him physically, but opened his eyes spiritually to see the risen Savior. As an apostle, Paul was appointed and sent by God to preach the gospel especially to the Gentiles, whom he formerly despised with a passion.

While perhaps none of us have had such a dramatic conversion as Paul had, if we know Christ as Savior we know that it was not our doing. We were spiritually dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1), living in futility, darkened in our understanding, excluded from the life of God because of our ignorance and hardness of heart, given over to sensuality and impurity with greediness (4:17-19). While we were in that condition, the glorious words of 2:4-5 broke into our lives: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)...." It was all because of "His kind intention which He purposed in Him" (1:9)!

2. Paul's description of believers tells us much about who we are and how we came to be this way (1:b).

"To the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus" (1:b). First, we are "saints." Contrary to popular usage, "saints" is not a term describing extraordinary believers, who

stand a notch above the rest of us. Rather, in the Bible, all believers are saints and all saints are believers. The word means, "set apart ones," "holy ones," or "sanctified ones." It means that we have been cleansed from all our guilt by Christ's sacrifice on our behalf (Heb. 10:10, 14). Thus we are separated from this evil world and set apart unto God for His holy purposes.

When we were in Nepal recently, we saw people at the Hindu temple trying to cleanse themselves from their sins by offering sacrifices and by washing with the putrid water from a supposedly holy river. It was a tragic sight! There is only one way to be cleansed from your sin and guilt, and that is through faith in the blood of Jesus, who offered Himself as the substitute for sinners.

Paul's second phrase to describe believers is that they are "faithful in Christ Jesus." "Faithful" may mean that they are reliable or obedient, but here it probably has the meaning, "believers." No one is saved apart from believing personally in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the object of our faith, and so we must understand something of who He is and what He did when He died on the cross.

While saving faith is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29), it is at the same time something that we must exercise. When God opens our blind eyes to see our own guilty condition and also the beauty and glory of the person of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross, we cease from our efforts to save ourselves. We cast ourselves totally on Christ. God places us "in Christ Jesus," so that all that is true of Him becomes true of us. As Paul puts it (1 Cor. 1:30-31), "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" Finally,

3. Paul's greeting sums up how we came to experience this great salvation in which we now stand (1:2).

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This is Paul's common greeting, but it is more than just a greeting. As Lloyd-Jones puts it (p. 36), "No two words are more important in the whole of our faith than 'grace' and 'peace.' Yet how lightly we tend to drop them off our tongues without

stopping to consider what they mean. Grace is the beginning of our faith; peace is the end of our faith.”

Grace is God’s unmerited favor. We deserved His judgment, but He saved us and blessed us. Peace with the holy God is the basic need of every sinner. We cannot appease Him by our own sacrifices or good deeds, because these cannot erase the stain of our sin. But, as Paul puts it in 2:14, “He Himself is our peace.” Christ reconciled us to God; He gives us peace within our hearts, even in the midst of trials; and, He reconciles us to one another.

When we experience God’s grace at the cross, instead of being our Judge, God becomes our Father and Jesus Christ becomes our Lord. Rather than running from God because we wanted to hide our sins and because we feared His judgment, we can draw near to God with hearts washed clean (Heb. 10:22). Instead of proudly running our own lives to promote our own interests, we now submit gladly to Jesus as Lord and Master, seeking to do His will.

Conclusion

Do you know personally what I’ve been talking about? Has God intervened in your life and rescued you from your sins? Has He opened your eyes to see the beauty of the One who offered Himself on the cross to be the substitute for your sins? If so, now you are a saint, a holy one, set apart to God from this evil world. You are a believer in Christ Jesus. You revel in His grace and abide in His peace. In the next few weeks, we will begin to explore the treasures of this great salvation.

Application Questions

1. What if a person grew up in the church and has not experienced a dramatic conversion—how can he know that he’s saved?
2. Why does Paul state that he is an apostle by the will of God? Why was this important to emphasize?
3. Why is it important to know that every Christian is a saint? What implications does this have?
4. Why is God’s grace foundational to salvation and the Christian life?

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