

11 July 2021 – Ephesians 1

BIBLE READINGS

Acts 19:1, 8-10

Ephesians 1:1-14, 2:1-10

MESSAGE – Blessing and grace

I wonder if you've ever pondered how the world works ...

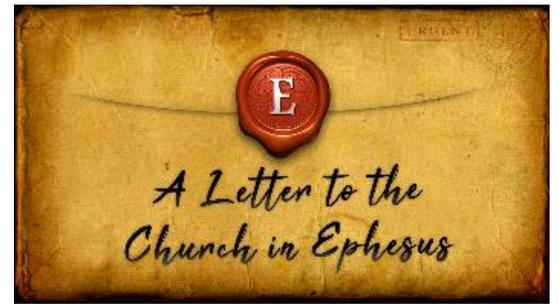
- *Is it a matter of cause and effect or karma ... that we reap what we sow ... so that if I do good to others and live at peace with them, then good will come to me?*
- *Or is it the case that might is right and the spoils always go to the winner? So to be successful you must be stronger, smarter, meaner ... and often a (white) male?*
- *Or is most of life destined to be painful, so that the way ahead is to become detached from the world? (Stoic)*
- *Or the opposite of this? We only live once so indulge yourself in as many worldly pleasures and experiences as possible? (Epicurean)*
- *Or do we accept that multiple gods or spirits rule the world and we must seek their favour and keep away from evil powers ... or risk facing the anger of the gods? (Pantheist)*
- *Or perhaps if we follow the monotheistic approach of Judaism, we will recognize that God is holy and just and merciful but also powerful and that we must be careful to follow God's ways?*

These were just some of the options available to the people in Paul's day. There were a wide range of philosophies and religions that one could follow depending on one's wealth and inclinations.

All of these were available in **Ephesus**, an important Roman city located on the west coast of modern day Turkey. Ephesus was a large cosmopolitan city, of up to half a million people, home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple of Artemis, goddess of the moon and fertility. The city had a grand amphitheatre seating some 25,000 people and temples to many gods. Paul considered it a strategic base from which to spread the gospel and spent two years ministering and teaching there, which we read about in the book of Acts. Paul later sent one of his close companions, Timothy, to pastor there.



The letter we know in our bibles as **Ephesians** is unique among the NT letters in that it was not provoked by some **problem in belief** or **behaviour** of the churches addressed. Instead the letter summarises the gospel story and how it reshapes every part of our life. Over the next few weeks we'll be unpacking the content of the letter and what it teaches us about the gospel and how to live the Christian life.



The letter begins with a Jewish style poem in which Paul praises God the Father for all the amazing things God has done through Jesus Christ.

And what a poem it is! Nathan Nettleton writes ...

The opening section of the letter is a big 'Wow!' Paul describes the big picture of God's plan for the world, and then stands back and exclaims 'Wow!' We sometimes lose this wow factor. We kind of get used to the gospel message ... we can begin to take it for granted and no longer be blown away by how extraordinary it is. Let's rework the language ...

Wow! Blessed be God!

All praise and honour be to the Father of our lord Jesus Christ!

God has gathered up all the spiritual blessings of heaven – everything we might have imagined would be kept for only the most extraordinary of saints – God has bundled them all up together and given them to us in our union with Christ.

So how has God blessed us?

- *God chose us before the foundation of the world (v4)*
None of us is unimportant or ignored. We are chosen ... just like Abraham and the Jewish people
- *God destined us for adoption as his children (v5)*
Life isn't random but intentional and guided by God's purpose
- *God freely bestowed on us grace in Jesus Christ (v6)*
God delights to give extravagantly and without cost
- *God lavished on us forgiveness and redemption (v7-8)*
God doesn't scrimp but rather gives abundantly
- *God made known to us the mystery of God's will through Christ (v9)*
God doesn't keep us in the dark but let's us in on what God is doing
- *God gathers up all things in Christ (v10)*
We are part of God's plan
- *God marked us with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit (v13)*
We are part of God's own people

These are God's actions, what God has done ... that reveal who God is.

And these actions have a destination ... **us!** God's people, the church.

What do **we** have to do to earn these blessings? ... nothing ... they are a gift of grace. The right response is **thanks** and **praise**.

Each time the Presbytery meets we hear a **pilgrimage story** as a person shares about their

community or congregation. One of the questions that is always asked of the person sharing is

*'Where do you see God's Spirit at work in your community?
Where do you see grace in action?'*

As we gather after church today at Croydon for our AGM, it's a good question to be asking ourselves ... and also for the folk at Croydon North ... as we look back over the last year or 18 months, where have **we** seen God's Spirit at work in our midst?

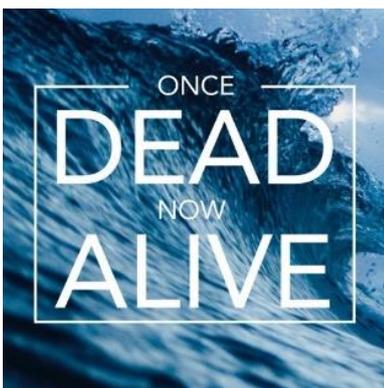
Perhaps in strengthening our sense of community?

Perhaps in the resilience of our people and our ministries?

Perhaps in the new connections and relationships of people we have welcomed into our midst, both in person and through Zoom?

The second part of our Ephesians reading today is from the second chapter as Paul elaborates on the theme of **grace**. It's an abrupt transition as we read:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived.

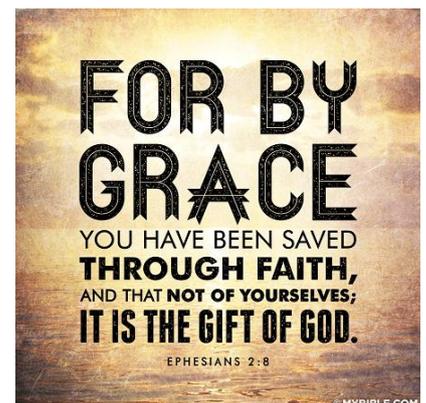


While some may find Paul's language rather stark, he is making a black and white comparison about what he sees as a life and death issue. People who don't know God are physically alive but spiritually dead according to Paul. They are like disobedient children, going their own way, doing as they please, unresponsive to God's presence or purpose in the world. Before we can come back at Paul with our protests 'But Paul, how about ...? Don't non-Christians do good ...?', Paul draws us back to **God** and **God's action** in making us **alive** together with Christ.

We've been **resurrected with Christ!** That's Paul's point. We were dead, but now we're spiritually alive, following in the pattern of Jesus. And so now we are able to respond to God.

This is all **grace**, according to Paul, all **God's work** ... not ours ... which is so hard for our fragile egos to grasp ... it's a gift!

Christian writer Philip Yancey notes that ...



The world can do almost anything as well or better than the church. You don't need to be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace. ... Grace is Christianity's best gift to the world, a spiritual supernova in our midst exerting a force stronger than vengeance, stronger than racism, stronger than hate. ... Aware of the apparent scandal of grace, Paul took pains to explain how God made peace with human beings ... God gave up his own Son rather than give up on humanity. (Philip Yancey 1997 What's so amazing about grace?)

So we are recreated as new human beings ... with a new purpose in the world, which according to Paul is to do the good works which God destined to be our way of life ... and which Paul will go on to illustrate in the second half of this letter. But before we get there, it's worth pausing to reflect on the fact that we are now to be regarded as God's masterpieces, God's works of art in the world! And that is deserving of another Wow!

Over the next few weeks, we'll be exploring more of this marvelous letter to the Ephesians. But for now, it's enough to know that God has a good plan for creation, and that plan includes us. Our response, as suggested in the opening poem, is to be people who praise God's name and whose lives are a living witness of God's goodness and grace. We are called to embody that grace and to pass it on to others.

