

Grace Changes Everything

Ephesians 2:1-10

We continue our series on Paul's letter to the Ephesians titled 'Growing Together.' Why Ephesians? When we started we read this quote: "We immerse ourselves in Ephesians to acquire a clean, uncluttered imagination of the ways and means by which the Holy Spirit forms *church* out of just such lives as ours." That about sums it up.

Last week I told the story of those 33 miners stuck in a hole in Chile. Their part of the mine caved in and for the last 50 days or so they've been trapped a half-mile underground. It took 17 days for the rescue teams to locate where they were trapped, and the task of bringing them to the surface is expected to go into November.

Remember that when the miners were found they'd already organized themselves into teams—they were sharing regular rations, they sleep and exercise and keep watch over each other in shifts. Most of this isn't part of their standard procedures. Most of this is handed down informally from grandfather to father to son—they've gone through so many tragic mining events that they've learned how to be ready—how to take care of each other and *live*.

That's how we want to be here in this church.

What we learn from Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a lot like what we can learn from those miners in Chile. Their skill and commitment, their willingness to stay together and trust each other—none of that happened by accident. It worked because they studied and remembered and practiced what to do when disasters strike. When that mine caved in no one had to tell them that they needed to look out for one another—to take care of each other. They'd been getting ready all along.

That's what we're going to do.

As we work our way through Ephesians we're going to be honest about life and faith and the world, and we're going to see how this important book of the Bible helps us become more a more mature church—a church family that's ready for anything.

Because we know that hard things are going to happen even as we grow in our lives as disciples. We also know that we struggle with believing that we can trust God at his word. And finally, we wonder where being a follower of Jesus fits in this crazy world. Too often churches forget that part of our job is to help people express and share and live their faith beyond the walls of this place—in the other 167 hours of the week.

I want to take that part of the church's job more seriously.

Ephesians is going to provide road map for us as we grow individually and as a church family. Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus has a lot to say about life and faith and how to live in a world that doesn't always understand who we are. Today's passage is an important part of that.

For years, every time I sat down to watch an American football game on TV, I saw the same thing. After a touchdown, the special teams would come out for the extra point. The offense and defense would get ready and the net would go up behind the goalposts to make it easier get the ball back after the kick. That's when you'd see it. There was always some guy in the stands holding up a bright yellow sign that said Eph. 2:8.

I always wondered about that guy. What did he do for a living? Did any of his family or friends know that that's how he spent his Sunday afternoons? What made him get a season ticket just so that he could have these few moments in each game when he might be seen on television holding up a Scripture reference that no one knew?

Our passage today includes that text of Scripture. Listen for God's word to you.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

First, that is one abrupt start to a passage. We go from some pretty flowery theological language—even for Paul—in the first chapter to this. In the first chapter we hear “praise be to our God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms,” and “I pray that your heart may be enlightened in order that you may experience the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.” We go directly from that to ‘As for you’. Now when you hear a sentence that starts with As for you, you know it's not going to go well for you. “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...”

I remember reading this and thinking: “I'm going back to the first chapter...it was a lot more fun.” But that would be missing the point. We can't get to the important idea of God's grace unless we get a reminder of just how much we need that grace in our lives.

The crucial truth to take from this text is that our sin isn't the end of our story.

In the very next breath Paul writes: “But because of his great love for us...” God's love and mercy are the starting point of our new lives, and he gives us that gift before we even understand that we need it. We saw in Romans last year that “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us...” It's like having a friend who starts to make up with you before you've even said you're sorry.

And then we get to Grace.

“It is by grace you have been saved.” What is this grace we keep hearing about? The pastor I grew up with talked about it as ‘undeserved favor’, something we can’t earn or make for ourselves—something we have to receive from someone else.

Eugene Peterson puts it this way: “Grace originates in an act of God that is absolutely without precedent, the generous, sacrificial self-giving of Jesus that makes it possible for us to participate in resurrection maturity. But we can’t participate apart from a willed passivity, entering into and giving ourselves up to what has gone before us...Such passivity does not come easy to us. It must be acquired.” Uh-oh.

I’ll bet my lunch money for a week that none of us actively tries to acquire any kind of passivity, that none of us consciously trains our kids to be passive in any way. And yet, without learning how to give ourselves up to the presence and action of God from time to time, we miss a crucial part of the grace he offers us.

The bottom line is this: God’s graces changes our values and methods and priorities. God’s grace changes everything, because when we welcome and make room for God’s grace in our lives, we experience in a deeper way the life that he wants for us—the life that he gives for us. We find that our salvation doesn’t come from how much we earn or what we own or where our kids go to school. Our salvation comes only from God, and only in the form of a gift we don’t deserve.

The whole point of this text is wrapped up in the last three verses, including the one that guy held up on his sign: Ephesians 2:8-10. Listen to how all of that sounds in *The Message*.

“Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.”

What should we take away from this part of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians?

First: Learning to be ready to take care of each other as a Christian community begins with believing that through Christ God has taken care of us first. Our text today reads chronologically: God acted, so we could become who we were meant to be, so we could go where we were meant to go.

Second: Through Christ we join God in the work he’s doing in this world. Churches tend to think we’re out there, leading the spread of the gospel in the world. But the best advice I ever got for how to become an effective church was this: “Look around and see what God is already doing in the world, and join in.” Being a maturing, growing church is about seeing where God is working, and throwing ourselves into the effort. I said last week that the point isn’t what the church ought to be doing, but what God wants to do through the people of the church.

That's the best insurance against thinking that we're the ones behind the good things that happen here. Last week we heard Zena and Natasha talk about their time on a mission trip with Habitat for Humanity. Pretty easy to feel good about that one—we helped pay their expenses, they went and did the work at the site—it would be easy to think that we were behind all of that. We weren't. What happens in this place isn't what we do, it's what God does through us.

And finally: That work is done through the church—through the imperfect, broken, complaining, addicted, abused, jealous greedy and forgiven people...people just like us. Understanding that grace changes everything begins with acknowledging that there are parts of our lives that we need God to enter in and change.

I could throw a list at you, but seriously, don't we all know where we wish God would transform us into the people he made us to be? The key here is that we don't have to be perfect, don't have to be successful, don't have to be rich, don't have to send our kids to elite universities—we don't have to measure up to have God use us in a meaningful way. The old saying goes like this, and it's true: God doesn't care about our ability, what he really wants is our availability.

When I think back on that guy at football games who held up the Eph. 2:8 sign, my first thought is probably similar to yours: 'What a nut.'

But in the end all he was really trying to do was remind us of something very important, that it is by grace that we're brought into God's presence and kingdom—that it's by grace that we have been saved. It's by grace alone that we have anything in our lives that matters.

That reminder is the task of the church. That's how we prepare for hard times—it's how we learn to take care of each other when those hard times come—it's how we fellowship and worship and grow in faith and serve the world. It is by grace that we learn to live the way we were meant to live all along.

This passage of Ephesians is the gateway to being a mature disciple of Jesus. Maybe the right response to the guy with the sign wasn't to dismiss him. Maybe the right move was to buy a season ticket and sit next to him so he could hold a bigger sign.

My prayer for all of us is that we'll grow into a church that announces to the world the good news that we find in that single verse from Ephesians.

"For it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."

There is just one hymn that will measure up to the power of that passage of Scripture. Let's stand and sing it together: 'Amazing Grace.'