3-11-18

Ephesians 1:1-2 (3)

Paul has begun his letter to the Ephesians using several words and ideas that are very important in Christianity. While this type of greeting was standard in letter writing of his day, Paul makes it Christian and brings out important ideas that he will return to throughout the letter. He gives his credentials as an apostle or “sent one”; specifically, he is sent by Jesus Christ Himself. We are familiar with the account in Acts 9 where Paul meets the risen Christ while on his way to Damascus. Jesus commissions Paul as an apostle who is sent especially to the gentiles. Knowing that Jesus always acts according to the will of His Father, Paul has his office by the will of God.

The letter is written to the saints, that’s us, anyone who is a believer in Jesus Christ as Saviour. We are “set apart” from the rest of the world. We are still citizens of whatever town and country we live in, but we are set apart from those who are of the world. We are set apart because we are citizens also of the Kingdom of God, and this is where we place our loyalty. We claim Jesus as our King and we are faithful to Him above all others.

So, Paul is writing to Christians, to people who have already accepted Jesus as their Saviour. This is important. If we are guiding someone toward Jesus and they are willing to read some of the Bible, we don’t start them off in Ephesians because Ephesians is for those who have already accepted Christ. The things written here will not make any sense to someone who does not know Jesus. Once we have presented the Gospel to someone, it is best to direct them to Matthew, Mark, or Luke to begin reading. Now, having said that, the Holy Spirit can, and certainly does, bring people to Jesus from anywhere in Scripture. As a rule of thumb, it’s best for us to point someone who is searching to the Gospels.

This brings us to verse two in the introduction, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This section of a letter would have consisted of well wishes for the recipient. Paul has done this but actually made it a short prayer on behalf of the Christians who read it. His prayer is for them to receive grace and peace from God the Father and God the Son. So, these are not just ordinary grace and peace.

Grace is fundamental to Christianity. If it wasn’t for grace, we wouldn’t have anything from God, least of all, salvation. We define grace as “unmerited favor”. God gives us favor, He looks upon us in kindness, He bestows blessings on us, and we have done absolutely nothing to earn or deserve this favor. Now, it is natural for us to think that we aren’t all bad, we’ve done some nice things and there are certainly lots of other people who are worse than we are. Perhaps we’ve earned a little bit of favor from God. The problem here is that we compare ourselves to other people when the true standard is an absolutely holy and just God. Paul puts together several Scriptures from Psalms and Isaiah to describe our predicament in Romans 3:10-18.

“There is no one righteous, not even one;  
there is no one who understands;  
 there is no one who seeks God.  
All have turned away,  
they have together become worthless;  
there is no one who does good,  
not even one.”   
“Their throats are open graves;  
 their tongues practice deceit.”   
“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”   
“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”   
“Their feet are swift to shed blood;  
ruin and misery mark their ways,  
and the way of peace they do not know.”   
“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Not a very encouraging picture, but it’s not meant to be. That is the condition of the human heart left to its own devices. It clearly shows that we have no merit with God. In fact, according to His justice, we deserve immediate death and eternal separation from Him.

Here is where grace comes in. In our natural state we are enemies of God and objects of His wrath; but He loves us and has made a way for us. He sent His only begotten Son to be the propitiation for us, so that if we believe in Him, we receive His righteousness. But the grace goes deeper. Considering our condition, everything that Paul spelled out in the verses we read from Romans, there is no way that we would ever accept that means to salvation. Pride would stop us from submitting to Christ, unbelief would rule our thinking. Paul tells us the solution to this problem later in this letter to the Ephesians in verse 2:8.

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

God not only provided the way of salvation through the death of Jesus, He sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts and actually gives us the faith that we need to believe. The faith needed is not something we develop ourselves or have by our own wills; it comes to us entirely supernaturally, entirely spiritually; and so, our salvation is completely dependent on God, we in no way help ourselves. This is indeed, unmerited favor.

It is easy to confuse grace and mercy. They are similar and intimately involved with each other but they are different. Mercy brings forgiveness. It is not punishing us for our sins when we deserve it. Mercy keeps us from the judgement we deserve for rebelling against God. Grace gives us good things that we don’t deserve, it shows kindness when we deserve no good thing. We can see that mercy brings grace and that grace brings mercy. Mercy forgives, grace blesses.

In our verses for today, we may wonder why Paul prays for grace for the Christians. If they are Christians, they’ve already received grace to believe. The reason is that God’s grace isn’t restricted to providing the faith to accept Christ, although that is already more than we could hope for. Grace includes *all* unmerited favor that God pours out.

God has grace for all people, regardless of whether they are Christian or not. He gives undeserved blessings to everyone. This is not the saving grace we have been talking about, this is referred to as “common grace”. This began in the garden of Eden with Adam. Adam had been told that if he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would die. When Adam ate, he deserved to die immediately, but God gave him the undeserved blessing of a long life first. So it is with each of us and all people, as soon as we rebel against God, we deserve death; but God gives us time so that we might find Him and salvation.

This common grace is expressed in the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:45, “(The Father) causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” God provides every good thing that is provided. People who aren’t Christians can be blessed with good jobs, families, some degree of earthly happiness and prosperity. Many times, we see non-believers who have great prosperity and seem to have everything that life can offer. These are all blessings from God. The sad thing here is that these are all the blessings that non-believers will ever have.

Paul prays for grace for the Christians because even when we have accepted Christ, we are still unworthy to receive any good thing from God. The prayer is that God will bless us; and God does bless us. It is truly amazing to think that after all Jesus went through for us, to freely give us salvation, that God still wants to give good things to His children. Being God’s children is an example of grace, so is resurrection with a glorified body to spend eternity with Him. We don’t merit these things because we are Christian, they are part of the grace God has for us when our God given faith in Jesus saves us.

In our verses today, Paul also prays for peace for the Christians. The peace he prays for isn’t worldly peace, but divine peace. This is the kind of peace we read about in Philippians 4:7.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Any peace we have in the world is temporary. It depends on circumstances, on what is going on in life. We do experience times where it seems that everything is going smoothly and there are no big disruptions in our lives. But this can change in an instant; one phone call, one visit to the doctor, even just turning on the news and seeing how the world is. We all know people who simply have no peace in their heart; they are always worried about things that are happening in the world or perhaps family members. There is no lack of things to worry about which constantly robs people of any peace.

This is even common among Christians. Worry has a way of sneaking up on us, we suddenly find ourselves thinking about something and it takes over our thoughts and we have lost our peace. But Christians have a way to gain the special peace that comes from God; it’s by prayer. If we read the preceding verses to the passage from Philippians, we find that peace is the result of prayer. We are told not to be anxious, but to take all our cares to God in prayer, and also give Him thanksgiving, and we can receive this peace that passes all understanding.

This in no way means that Christians have no problems. Our lives are not suddenly perfect and without discomfort. We still face sadness, disappointment, loss; all the things that come with life in a fallen world. But with the peace of God through Christ, we do not despair. We do not lose hope. We take comfort that God is in control. When a Christian brother or sister we love passes away, we grieve. We feel pain and loss. But we do not despair and can even rejoice that our loved one is now so much better off. Peace comes from that knowledge and it is a peace the world cannot have.

The lack of worry is not apathy, it is not a lack of concern or compassion. It is simply a comfort within, a knowledge that God will work everything out and when it is all over, nothing will be left but the peace. We can’t make ourselves have that kind of peace, it is a gift from God. We are called to pray for it. As Paul shows here in this introduction, it is good to pray for peace in the hearts of others. This is a good intercessory prayer for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul prays for grace and peace, but not just any grace and peace. He seeks that which comes from God the Father and God the Son. Notice that he’s not too concerned about the things of the world, he is looking in the spiritual. Paul is a prisoner in Rome as he writes this letter and his concern is to pray blessings on God’s people and to praise God! How important this is. No matter our situation, we must not focus on ourselves. Certainly, pray for your own needs and desires; but don’t stop there. We are told to love our neighbor. We carry out that command by both action and prayer. This takes our time, but it is well worth it. God often uses other people to bring grace and peace.

We must also focus on Jesus. We have so much to thank Him for. If not for Him we would not have salvation, we would not have saving grace, and we would not have divine peace. It is not wrong to thank Him for every moment in our lives. Whether the time is good or bad, we ought to offer up praise and thanksgiving. It is our human tendency to focus on ourselves, but this is a tendency that the Holy Spirit is leading us away from. Don’t fight Him, look to God. He is the source of all our grace and peace.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, how precious it is that we can be called Your children. You have made us fellow heirs with Your only begotten Son, Jesus, who is the Christ. This is all a gift from You. Left on our own, we fall far from You; but You condescend to reach down from Heaven to raise us up. You bring us to You.

May Your Holy Spirit work in our hearts to give us an ever-growing understanding of what You have done. Help us to realize the extent of the grace You have shown us. Make this knowledge real to us so that we may praise You as You deserve. With this true knowledge, our hearts will have no choice but to sing of Your glory and offer thanksgiving.

Lord Jesus, even with all You have gone through on our behalf, You have nothing but love for us. It gives You joy to share Your inheritance with us. We look forward to that time when we can bow before You in Your presence; when we are able to see Your glory and serve You in Your Kingdom forever.

These things we pray in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ

Amen