3-4-18

Ephesians 1:1-2 (2)

Last week we talked about how Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ. It is important to keep in mind that this was not something Paul decided to do himself; it was by the will of God. This divine appointment caused Paul a great deal of hardship and sorrow, but he accepted the calling, and by God’s strength, did his best. His reward is great in heaven. It is because his calling was ordained by God through Jesus Christ, that we can read this letter to the Ephesians with complete confidence. We know that it is the word of God.

You and I have not been called as apostles like Paul was. Still, we have been called; we have been called as disciples of Jesus. If we call ourselves Christians, that means we have accepted this calling. To be a disciple of Christ means that we will face hardship. Jesus gives us that bad news, along with great encouragement, in part of John 16:33:

“In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

We will see throughout this book that Jesus has overcome the world, all the evil forces of darkness, even all of our own sin, to make us right with the Father. That is the good news of the Gospel, that we are saved. We face tribulation while we live this life, we face persecution because we are followers of Jesus Christ; but when it is over, our troubles won’t even be worth considering. Meanwhile, we are in this world, and Paul writes this letter for our benefit.

Let’s look at how Paul addresses us; as saints. That can sound funny to us because we picture saints as people who always walk around with their hands folded and a halo over their head. We are accustomed to using the word “saint” to describe someone who seems perfect or somehow above everybody else. But a saint is someone who is set apart. In the case of a Christian, we are set apart from the world and set apart for Christ.

Remember from our recent study of Acts 19 how Paul taught in the synagogue for three months. At that point the Jews, who were of the world, became too abrasive. So, Paul moved those who had become Christians to the school of Tyrannus. He set them apart. Now this is a physical representation of what should happen to us mentally and spiritually when we become Christians. We become separate from the ways of the world.

The most important change is that we are spiritually reborn in God the Father; we are born of the Holy Spirit. This is our spirits coming back to life after suffering death in sin and being adopted as children of God. Now a conflict takes place inside us: The spirit is at war with the flesh. The flesh wants to remain in the world and fights to do so. But we can no longer be comfortable there. Our spirit wants to go along with the Holy Spirit and by His strength we are separated from the world.

When we are born of the Spirit, our mind necessarily changes; this is because we receive the mind of Christ. Now this change takes place over time, it is part of the sanctification process. Sanctification is what takes place in our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. It consists of all the things we go through in life that make us more like Jesus. That is the goal of a disciple, to become like his Master. Interestingly enough, tribulation is often part of the sanctification process. From this, we can see that by becoming a Christian, we change spiritually and mentally; this change sets us apart from the world and we become saints.

Being a saint also lends itself to being holy; holy also has the idea of being set apart, as in a holy one of God. This has its roots in the Old Testament. The apostle Peter gathered together several quotes from Deuteronomy and Isaiah to show how Israel was set apart and to be holy.

1 Peter 2:9

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for *God’s* own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Notice that it was God who set the Israelites apart and it is God who sets us apart. We are saints because of Jesus Christ and through no merit of our own. He is the One who prepared us and called us by the Holy Spirit; He gave us the faith to believe. And we mustn’t forget that this is so that we can proclaim the excellencies of God.

Paul addresses the Christians as faithful. This word actually points us to two ideas or meanings, both of which apply. The first idea is to be a believer in Jesus. The second is to be loyal to Christ.

To be a Christian means that you believe in Jesus Christ. That is fundamental, it would make no sense at all to claim to be a Christian and to deny Jesus. But more comes with it. We believe in what the Bible tells us about Him. All that the Bible tells us about Jesus must be true or we really can’t find our salvation in Him.

Jesus is God. He was part of the Triune God since eternity past and will be for eternity future. He had to be God to save us because the One to save us had to be perfect and God is the only One who is perfect. Jesus was completely a man. Is was a man, Adam, who got us into this mess in the first place. It has to be a man who gets us out of it. Countless thousands of animals were sacrificed on our behalf but they could not remove the guilt of our sin; by them God held His wrath until the acceptable sacrifice was made.

We believe that He was born of a virgin. If this is not true, then Jesus had an earthly father and was not God. God did not simply manifest Himself on a man, He manifested Himself as a man. What He went through on the cross was fatal; in addition to enduring the wrath of God on our behalf, He had to undergo the ultimate punishment for sin and that is death. We believe that Jesus was resurrected. If He was not, then He was not victorious over death.

The Bible tells us these things and more about Jesus and they all must be true or we have no salvation. These are necessary to Christian belief. The belief we have is not based on evidence we can see or touch, our belief is based on faith. Faith can be a hard thing to define or explain properly. Try it sometime. We often hear faith used in the wrong way. For example, someone may have a junky car and decide to go on a long trip with it. They will say, “I’ve got faith in it.” What they really mean is they know it’s a bad idea to go on a long trip with a junk car, but they’re going to do it anyway. This is not faith.

The truest definition of faith comes from Hebrews 11:1:

Now faith is the substance of *things* hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Now that’s very hard to explain to someone who is not a Christian, while to a Christian it makes perfect sense. The reason for that is that faith is a spiritual thing. The closest thing in the natural is hope and this type of hope is simply wishing for something to happen; maybe it will, maybe it won’t. That is why unbelievers think that Christians are simply hoping things work out, things that are impossible. True faith is a gift from the Holy Spirit. He gives us the ability to believe in Jesus Christ as our Saviour. It is a true belief, it is a sure hope, it is real.

By this same gift of faith, we can read the Bible and know that what it says is true. We believe the miracles, they are the testimony that Jesus is who He says He is. We believe the amazing progression of creation to the birth of Christ and the early church. It is so inspiring each time we see a connection that shows God’s plan at work throughout history. Faith gives us the understanding to see the world hurtling toward the end of history foretold in the Bible.

The second idea of faithfulness is loyalty. Primarily this is loyalty to Jesus. We believe in Him and no other; we don’t try to hedge our bets by holding onto Jesus with one hand and something else with the other, just in case. Even if someone is able to out-argue us against Christianity, we continue to believe and turn to the Bible to find the answer for the next time. This loyalty involves suffering that persecution we talked about earlier. First century Christian families were executed in lion’s dens rather than simply saying, “Caesar is Lord.” Even now, Christians are imprisoned or executed for faith in Christ. Does Jesus really call us to this kind of loyalty? Yes; He suffered and died for us.

Christian faithfulness extends to our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are part of the body of Christ, we are mystically bonded together. Jesus certainly calls us to sacrificially love and care for each other. Additionally, Jesus commands us to love our neighbor. We need to be trustworthy even to unbelievers. If for no other reason than to give them no cause against us. Let the only thing they can have against us be our claim to Jesus.

Paul also points out that in addition to being saints and faithful, Christians are also in Christ Jesus. This came up in our study of 1 John some time ago. The apostles have the same message. They had different personalities, different ways of saying things, sometimes different angles from which to make their point; but it was all focused on Jesus Christ and Him crucified and that, as Christians, we are in Christ.

Being in Christ is a beautiful thing. When we accept Him as Saviour, His Spirit somehow blends with our spirit. As Jesus says in Revelation 3:20:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.

To share a meal with someone can show a close relationship. With Jesus speaking, we can think of the Lord’s supper, how Jesus wanted to spend some close time with His friends. We can think of the wedding supper of the Lamb, that meal waiting for us in heaven where we will be free of sin and death. As the church, we are called the body of Christ. We are part of Him, connected to God. It is so hard for us to grasp, but it’s there for us.

Consider that He is the vine and we are the branches. All our spiritual nourishment comes from Him and if we are separated from Him we cannot survive. He does provide for us, physically and spiritually. Our eternal life is dependent on Him.

We can also see that we are saints and we are faithful *in Christ*. It is only by His strength and guidance that we have any claim to these descriptions. We are still sinful, we still fail; it is only by Christ’s blood that we are clean. His love for us is beyond understanding, but it is good for us to think on it sometimes. Just try to imagine how much love it would take to do the things He has done for us.

With these things we become by God’s grace, comes responsibility on our part. We need to act like saints, we need to be faithful, our lives should be lived like someone who is in Christ. When people have been around you for a while, do they notice that you’re different? I don’t mean that you have to be weird, but can folks tell that you have different reasons for doing things, a different way of looking at things? Do you tend to consider things eternally instead of in the here and now? Even though you are different, are you kind and concerned for others?

This is the kind of life that will attract others to you and give opportunity for sharing the Gospel. It is also the kind of life that will give offence to those who have already hardened their heart to Jesus. This kind of life will give opportunity to give blessings and to receive curses. This is the kind of life we are called to as followers of Christ. This was the life of Jesus.

Prayer

LORD, what an honor it is to be set apart for You. We have done nothing that deserves Your favor and yet You give us important work; work that You have ordained for us from before time began, from before creation.

Part of that work is prayer; intercession for others to turn to Jesus for salvation. This is work that the saints, the faithful, those who are in Christ Jesus are called to do. Let this be encouragement for us to pray for our loved ones who have not turned to You, indeed, have turned away from You. You do not give us futile work. So, we ask for the strength and motivation to continue to pray for those You have put into our lives.

Holy Spirit, keep Jesus in the forefront of our minds, so that we think of Him before we speak or act. Then may our actions and words be the kind that attract people and give a hearing for the Gospel.

We offer this prayer in Jesus’ name

Amen