

Introduction to Ephesians and the New Year.

Ephesians 1:1-8

Over the coming weeks and months we are going to be looking at Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. If we take on board what the Holy Spirit would say to us, we are going to be blessed and encouraged.

It is an encouraging letter, written to faithful followers of Christ Jesus. And Paul's prayer right at the start is that God the Father would give them grace and peace.

He gives All praise to God for everything we have in Christ Jesus.

The words "in Christ" or "in Him" are used 20 times. He wants us to know that we are no-longer under the control of Satan and in his dominion but we are now in Christ. We benefit from all that he has won for us, which Paul goes on to list:

Every spiritual blessing. (Surely the greatest spiritual blessing is the total forgiveness of sin and acceptance into His family).

Before he made the world God loved us and chose us in Christ.

He chose in advance to adopt us into his own family.

He purchased our freedom with the blood of Christ.

He has showered his kindness on us.

He has included us, Gentiles in his great plan of salvation so that Jew and Gentile may be part of one family having the same eternal hope.

The covenant blessings for the Jews are now made available to Gentiles.

This is a letter for the church, that is very much about the church.

I wonder what the average person on the street thinks when you mention the word "Church"?

I think you'll find a wide range of views from those who hate what they understand to be "religion" and all it stands for, others who couldn't care less and those who love the church.

I have heard people refer to Christians as hypocrites, judgemental, condemning, prejudiced, people who have lost touch, too many rules about what you have 'to do' and 'can't do' and "it's great for those who need something to believe in". I'm sure you have heard similar comments and many more.

The church is often mocked or portrayed as nothing more than a dead relic of the past and an institution that is out of touch.

For many, however, it is through the church that their lives have been given real purpose, unspeakable joy, lasting peace, hope, direction, healing, freedom from oppression and so much more.

I think we all agree there is a world of difference between dead religion and a true relationship with our living saviour Jesus Christ.

I want people to experience Christ. To understand what it is to be truly born of Him and to live a new life, the life God intended and designed us for.

Eph 1:11-12 (Message)

"It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs for glorious living, part of the overall purpose He is working out in everything and everyone."

The church is not confined to four walls but is the people of God, a community of believers who have come alive through Christ, born of the spirit and filled with His Holy Spirit. The church is His people, of every race and nation, who love the Lord Jesus Christ and who are committed to serving him.

**What does a great church look like?
It looks exactly like the people in it.**

I am so glad the apostle Paul's letters reveal a church with all its struggles; the good, the bad and the ugly! What was evident in the early church is true in today's churches. The same struggles and the same hope.

Churches that were **going cold** and **losing their first love**, others being **polluted by false doctrine**, churches that were **becoming just like the world** and embracing its values, those that **appeared to be alive** but were actually close to death, as well as **faithful thriving** church communities and those being **persecuted** for the gospel.

Paul established churches in places that were full of paganism, Idolatry, false religions, man made philosophy, humanism and all manner of godlessness. He also had to contend with false churches and church leaders who were full of themselves, projecting an image of power and success. These so called, or self proclaimed "super apostles" were imposters boasting of success, but their success was not true success. At least not the kind of success God would recognise.

They turned people's heads, spoke with great conviction but didn't advance the gospel one bit.

Boasting isn't pleasant. It makes others feel inadequate, inferior, perhaps at times embarrassed about their own failings. Others feel they have to put on a false persona, a mask so as not to feel foolish and ashamed.

A boastful American was being shown the sights of London by a taxi driver.

"What's that building there?" Asked the American.

"That's the Tower of London, sir," replied the taxi driver.

"Say, we can put buildings like that up in two weeks," drawled the Texan.

A little while later he said, "And what's that building we're passing now?"

"That's Buckingham Palace, sir, where the Queen lives."

"Is that so?" Said the Texan. "Do you know, back in Texas, we could put a place like that up in a week?"

A few minutes later, they were passing Westminster Abbey. The American asked again,

"Hey cabbie, what's that building over there?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, sir," replied the taxi driver. "It wasn't there this morning."

Paul, against his better judgement decides to go head to head in a boasting match. His list of success's was astonishing. Not because it made him look great but because it showed the price he had paid to faithfully serve God. It showed his own inadequacy and his need to rely upon God, rather than on his own strength and natural ability.

2 Cor' 11:23-33

Are they ministers of Christ? I speak as a fool - I am more: Labours more abundant, stripes above measure, prison more frequently, facing death often, whippings, beatings with rods, ship wrecked, in deep cold water through night and day, frequent journeys, facing robbers, peril from Gentile and from Jews, from false brethren, sleeplessness, often hungry, fasting, naked, cold, and on top of all this his deep concern for all the churches.

"If I must boast, I will boast of the things which concern my infirmity."

Why? Because this is how Christ is glorified and the gospel proclaimed with power.

As I become more aware of my inadequacy and my failings, I have a choice; give up or turn to Jesus.

Jesus told Paul something that is equally true for us. He said; ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."*** (2 Cor 12:9).

Hands up anyone who wants to be able to boast like Paul? Perhaps none of us will come even close to the suffering Paul faced.

Saul uses his Roman name Paul in his letters. The name means "little" He didn't want to be known as a great man, but a 'little man' who served a great God.

I am so glad Paul was prepared to pay the price and he was so honest about his own frailty and need of God. He knew and trusted Jesus wholeheartedly.

It may not have seemed like a blessing to him, but his imprisonment was certainly a blessing for us. He was able to write letters that have changed my life. As Paul himself said; "the gospel is not chained". It cannot be restrained, so long as the true church has breath, the good news of Christ will be proclaimed and will find a way to people's hearts.

At his conversion, Jesus forewarned him that He would show Paul how much he must suffer for Him.

If we are looking for an easy and comfortable life then the Christian life is not for us. I have not found a single scripture that tells me life will become easy when I turn to Christ.

His yoke is easy! But not the ease of this world. His yoke is well fitting for the call he has upon my life. It is still a yoke! It still requires that I put my full weight against it, but praise God, it fits so well that I find great satisfaction and comfort in serving God.

Jesus gave to us the great commandment. A command to love

Command Matt 22:37-38 (love God with all - heart, soul & mind)

He gave the great commission to seek the lost

Commission Matt 28:19 (therefore go and make disciples)

He also gave the great challenge, to take up the cross

Challenge Matt 16:24-26 (taking up the burden of sacrifice)

"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, will find it. For what profit is it for a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

To me this is a no brainer.

Live for myself = lost eternity

Live for God = joy forevermore

Salvation is a miracle.

People naturally want to save their lives not to lose them.

This is a constant struggle and the scriptures continually remind us that we have an eternal home and this life is not just a trial run. The choices we make now have eternal consequences. We are told to encourage one another with these words.

Our eyes have to be opened to heavenly realities or else we will continue to live for earthly rewards.

Paul hated Christians, the church and everything about Jesus until God opened his eyes and softened his heart.

We are first introduced to Paul at the death of Stephen in **Acts 7:58-60, 8:1-3**

The contrast between Stephen and this cold, heartless persecutor of the church is so clear.

Stephen was distributing food to the poor and looking after the vulnerable. He was sharing the good news of God's love and grace. He even cried out to God to forgive those who were stoning him to death.

Paul however destroyed lives, broke up families, scattered believers and caused untold distress, all in the name of God. Paul was a very clever man, with great knowledge of the scriptures, but he was far from God.

He thought he was doing God's work but he was doing the very opposite.

Acts 9:1-2 He was breathing murderous threats against God's people, he went to get arrest warrants from the High Priest so he could throw in prison anyone he may find who followed Christ.

V3 "suddenly a light shone around him from heaven."

Suddenly, Jesus showed up.

Saul had no prior warning, Jesus cut across all his plans, his journey was interrupted, it came to him from nowhere. A great light hit him and he heard the voice of Jesus. He was brought to the point of decision and confronted with the true nature of his actions.

Paul was a changed man from that moment on and so was his understanding of Christ and the church.

Jesus works in and through the church.

Jesus told him - "You touch my church, my people, you touch me". You kill those I have called, speak against them, persecute them and you do it to me. Jesus is identifying Himself with His people in a way that Paul is later to understand by revelation to be the very body of Christ. Jesus dwells in the body of believers and is made known in and through them. This mystical body, the church is the very representation of Christ and if you persecute the church you are persecuting Christ Himself.

Paul had a great revelation concerning the church.

His conversion turned a man who persecuted the church and tried to destroy it to someone who understood it was Jesus, his Messiah who was working in and through it. It is literally the family of God. Don't mess with God's family was the warning he was given!

It is all of Grace.

God's intervention in his life was nothing less than an act of grace and Paul recognised that the same favour is necessary for anyone to believe. He understood God had a foreordained purpose for His life and therefore for each one of us. He was able to live this life because his eyes were opened to reality.

God had come "suddenly" to a stubborn, cold and murderous heart and shone a bright light into his life, at that moment, the most glorious light, that continued to transform his understanding, flooded his being. He prayed that our hearts too would be flooded with light.

Don't judge by outward appearances. God sees the true condition of our heart.

Whilst Paul persecuting Christ, there was an inner conflict going on. He was kicking like a belligerent child against the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Behind this cold, hard exterior was a man in turmoil. He saw people willing to die and bless their persecutors in the process. He saw them crying out to God, trusting God and willing to lose everything for the sake of Christ. Their faith was not lost on him. How could it be?

Paul's conscience however was forever marked with the pain of their loss. Their memory will have remained a driving force as a follower of Christ, causing him never to shrink back or compromise for the sake of Jesus

The example of others leaves a lasting impression on us. Your example to others will do the same. You are being watched. Your unsaved spouse, family members, work colleagues, friends etc all see your life and you can be salt and light to them.

God's forgiveness changes everything!

He who is forgiven much, loves much. When we realise the extent of God's forgiveness, the price he paid for us, it changes the very course of our life and our reason for living.

In Acts 19 we read about Paul's mission in Ephesus and in V18 we hear about many who believed coming and confessing their deeds. **We get to understand a little bit more about the type of people in this faithful and thriving church.** The church was not a place for the 'goodie goodies' who had done nothing wrong. If Paul, a murderer could be forgiven, so could anyone who turns to Christ.

When they gave testimony as they gathered, they must have been the most moving and powerful times together.

What were they confessing in Ephesus?

Not just their good deeds, they were not putting church faces on, they were confessing and telling about their lives of sin and how Christ had graciously accepted the vilest of offenders.

They confessed not just general sinfulness, but specific acts of sin that they had now renounced and turned from. Books of magic spells were burned and the Word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed. V20

"They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony."

In fact the word prevailed so mightily that it caused a riot in Ephesus. Christianity was affecting the local economy! They couldn't sell the silver idols and trinkets that Demetrius and others were selling for the worship of false gods and so Demetrius stirred up the other traders and a riot kicked off "This trade of ours is in danger of falling into disrepute" he said. "Praise God!" I say.

Wouldn't it be great to have an economy powerfully influenced by the purchasing habits of Christians?

The Ephesian Church was a great church and in Acts we read about the incredible impact it had for advancing the gospel.

In its day, this is a church you would want to be part of. It is thought that it was founded by Aquila and Priscilla who had a thorough understanding of scripture. The church also had a teacher called Apolus who was described as being "mighty in the scriptures". Aquila and Priscilla taught him more thoroughly in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul on his third missionary journey stayed there 2 years equipping the church and its leaders (Acts 20) and later Timothy pastored the church. Then they had another faithful servant called Tichicus and then the great apostle John!

The church was firmly founded on sound doctrine and had an amazing beginning. Things really took off and a great ministry in the word went out from this church. The word was confirmed with powerful miracles and caused an almighty stir.

The devil doesn't like hell being plundered through the faithful ministry of the word. The converts were idolaters, witches, sexually immoral, corrupt people in the prevailing culture and there was great opposition to the gospel.

Yet the church flourished as people were converted from out of this culture. God's word is powerful and effective!

They had the basics right. Dedication to the apostles teaching, fellowship, breaking bread together and corporate prayer.

This gives me great hope for our towns and cities. If God's word could deliver people out of that culture, he can do the same now in ours.

In Revelation 2, Jesus heaped praise on the Ephesian church.
I know your deeds and your labour

***You toiled for the kingdom
You've not stood for evil behaviour
You have patiently endured
You have tested those who speak in His name and weeded out false
apostles. They knew the word! They were not going to be fooled
easily!
You've persevered.
Not given any place to the devil. Hated evil in the church.***

What great praise from Jesus. A great church by any measure. They could say in truth that they were giving all for Jesus.

When Paul writes to Ephesus, he is writing to a church in its prime. A faithful and flourishing community of believers.

Yet only a generation later and Jesus was ready to remove their lamp-stand. Why? because they had left their first love.
Rev' 2:4

Paul was encouraged when he heard that the church at Ephesus had a **strong faith** in the Lord and **a love for God's people everywhere**. (Ephesians 1:15)

These were the strongest evidences that their faith was real and that this was a true church. A genuine community of believers. It was evidenced by a love for God and for each other.

The love that is demonstrated in this church, at Kingsway, for God and others is truly humbling and I want the world to see and experience God's love too, but we mustn't become complacent. We need to continue in the Word, fellowship, breaking bread together and prayer. Our hearts need to be kept awake to the purpose and calling of God.

Don't hold grudges or deny the work of Christ in others.

With so many people being converted from lives of sin, it would have been so easy for the church to judge others, to disqualify them from service and tar them for life.

It took a while for believers to come to terms with Saul's conversion. Many believers suspected he was still out to get them. They could have held a grudge against him concerning Stephen and others for the wrong he had done.

Acts 9:15-16

Ananias was not just a little concerned about Jesus choice of Saul. He pointed out to Jesus the harm he had done to the saints in Jerusalem, as if Jesus needed to be told. Jesus had felt every blow, felt their pain, their loss

and heard their cry for help, but Jesus sees much deeper within. He saw in Saul the man he would use to bless the church.

".....he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel."

"Chosen" - hand picked

"Mine" -

"Bear My name"

V16 "For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My Name's sake"

God can use anyone. It is His Spirit and His ability we need.

Acts 9:11-18

The bible says little about Ananias, only that he was a believer and he saw in a vision and heard God speak to him about Saul. He was a man filled with the Holy Spirit and God was able to communicate very clearly with him. In return he was obedient and did what God said.

Sounds simple. But what a difference we can make when we are open and obedient to God!

We may think that these things are unusual, out of the ordinary, but they were the normal experience of the early church. Believers were filled with the Holy Spirit at their conversion and the evidence was in the operation of spiritual gifts.

We should be asking to be filled with the Holy Spirit so we too can live "normal Christian life".

Don't hold back.

Saul's conversion included an encounter with Jesus Christ, deep repentance and fasting, the restoration of his sight, water baptism and the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

He was only with the believers a few days before he began to preach! He was immediately empowered by the Holy Spirit for ministry and He began to minister right away. The baptism in the Holy Spirit releases His gifts, grace gifts that can be operated immediately.

V22 as he operated in the gift of teaching, his gift "became more and more powerful."

God gives us a love for the church. He changes hearts.

Paul's meeting with the elders of the Ephesian church at Miletus tells us so much about the love Paul had for people and the church.

They were filled with great sadness because they thought this would be the last time they would see him.

Acts 20:17-38

They wept together on the beach and prayed as he left them. An incredible transformation of a man who once persecuted and killed believers.

I hope over the coming weeks we will be encouraged and challenged to be the people God intends for us to be.

What next?

Over the coming months we are going to be teaching each Sunday from the book of Ephesians. There are a number of verses that are key verses in the Christian faith, but essentially it is a letter that helps us to understand the true nature of the church, the call God has placed on the church and on you and me as members of the body.

It helps us to understand God's purpose.

When we respond to Christ's love, as Paul did, by trusting in Him, His purpose becomes our life's mission.

We are confronted with the question; have I committed myself to fulfilling God's purpose?

Pray and immerse yourself in this book. Talk about it in your small groups and encourage one another with the great hope it brings to every believer.