

# *The* **GRACE** *project*

## **A STUDY THROUGH EPHESIANS**

This morning we are starting a series through the book of Ephesians called The Grace Project. It is called the Grace Project for obvious reasons. Grace is the major theme of the book. Grace is the name of our church. Even the church's wifi password is based on Ephesians. ;-) It's almost impossible to say that some books of the Bible are more important than other books. But having said that, Paul's letter to the Ephesians is widely considered to be among the most influential books in the Bible.

I have been looking forward to this series for a long time but I have to admit that it comes with a little disappointment. As I have mentioned on several occasions, Ryan Kappel and I started studying this book together starting last June and we didn't finish until last December. We worked through every verse together. Then we were planning to share the preaching with me doing about 75% of the series. The idea came to me about this time last year while I was running on the treadmill and memorizing the book. I had this idea that we would study it together, both of us memorize it and then preach through the entire book. I also thought that we would develop ministry and discipleship ideas from the preaching series. This is the reason it is called the Grace Project. The intent is for it to be much more than just a sermon series.

I'm still looking forward to what God will do as we work our way through this amazing book but I have to admit that it is sad and disappointing that our plan did not work out as intended. I will only mention this once. I don't mean to draw out pains from the past but since I had been talking about this idea for so long, I wanted to acknowledge this fact.

Where do you start with such a wonderful book? Someone asked me if I was going to do an overview of the whole book. No, I'm not going to do that, though I will slide some background info in once in a while. I'll also say this much. Chapters 1-3 are doctrine and chapters 4-6 are application. You might imagine that you would start with chapter one and verse one. But as I looked over my notes I decided to start at verse fifteen instead. You'll see why in a bit.

*15 For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, 16 I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may*

*know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might 20 that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*

I'm going to teach this passage from the perspective of a shepherd. Now a shepherd is obviously a pastor or an elder but a shepherd is also anyone who is responsible for helping someone else's spiritual growth. Therefore, all parents and grandparents are shepherds. Most people have some impact on someone else's spiritual life. Therefore, you are a shepherd in some sense.

1. Shepherds pray for their flock without ceasing.

*For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, 16 I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers,*  
We know that Paul prayed for the believers in his life. In almost every letter that he wrote to churches, Paul told them that he thanked God for them. Prayer was part of his life. But this letter to the church in Ephesus has some of the deepest, most important prayers in all of Scripture.

Toward the end of his life, the prophet Samuel made a most amazing statement about prayer. "Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you" (1 Samuel 12:23). This must have been exactly how Paul felt as well. He was what we would call a prayer warrior. But his prayers were not ordinary prayers.

2. Shepherds pray for supernatural enlightenment.

The key phrase in this passage is the first part of verse 15—"For this reason." This is really important and it's the reason I started at verse fifteen instead of verse one. Paul is about to offer a prayer for this church, but the prayer is based upon what he wrote in the first fifteen verses. For this reason. For what reason? What he is saying was that because the truths shared in the first fifteen verses were so deep, so vital to them that only prayer could unlock their truths. Not *just* the truth contained in the first fifteen verses but at least that truth.

Before he told them what he was praying, he told them why he was praying. *17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know.* What Paul prayed for is very important but do not miss the reason he was praying for them. A shepherd knows that his people need wisdom, revelation and to have the eyes of their hearts enlightened in order to understand eternal truths.

We pray these prayers quite often, don't we? Before the sermon or at the start of a Bible study we ask for wisdom and Holy Spirit guidance. It's a good habit but I'm not sure we always mean it. That prayer is a bit like saying grace before a meal—it's mostly something that we have learned to do.

I may have committed the cardinal sin this past week. We met for our pastor's prayer breakfast. As a general rule, the first person who gets their food prays for the whole group. While I never get my food first since I'm never the first one to arrive. So when my food came I just started digging in and only a minute or two later did I realize that I should have been the designated prayer person. So can you imagine that—I was in a group of pastors and I callously ate before praying. It was a little embarrassing!

But we have to get beyond mere rote prayers. It's tough to pray before a meal or before a sermon or Bible study without feeling a little like you're just going through the motions. We know we *should* pray at these times but our prayers can feel a bit stale. But not Paul. He prayed *that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened...* First of all, it's a good idea just to pray these exact Scriptures. As evangelicals we often feel like we should always make up our own prayers. We think that only the mainline and liberal churches read from a book of liturgy and written prayers. That seems too dead and lifeless so we always make up our own prayers. But dads and moms and other kinds of shepherds, why not just follow the prayers that the Bible lays out? So by all means, create your own prayers but also consider praying the actual Scriptures.

And this one is even more important because it not only gives you the words to pray but the reason to pray. You are praying for wisdom and revelation and enlightened hearts. Understand that this is not just a side benefit kind of prayer, like icing on the cake. This is not your average, "Lord, give them traveling mercies" kind of prayer. This is not just a prayer to bless the food to our bodies and keep watch over us. Paul is saying that unless you have this supernatural enlightenment, you will not understand the content of this letter. And if you don't understand the content of the letter, you will struggle in your Christian life. Just listen to some of the themes of rich doctrine contained in the first fifteen verses.

- even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.
- In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will
- In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace
- making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ
- In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will
- In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

There is choosing, predestination, redemption, grace, mystery of his will, inheritance, sovereign purpose and will. That's some heavy stuff right there. These are some of the major themes of the letter and Paul is saying that the understanding of these can only come through prayer. If you do

not have the supernatural enlightenment, you're going to miss them. By extension, that would apply to all of Scripture but especially to this section.

We can't know some things unless God intervenes and gives us a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him. We can't know his truth unless the eyes of our hearts are enlightened. One of the most striking answers to prayer happened in an elder meeting several years ago. We were really struggling through an issue and none of us had answers. We were desperate for answers so we prayed the typical prayer asking for God's wisdom. We truly had no answer whatsoever. It was one of the most helpless feelings I have ever had. So we prayed for wisdom. Actually, we didn't just ask God for wisdom, we begged Him. After we were done praying the answer came all at once. Honestly, I don't even remember the exact problem or solution but I'll never forget the immediate answer we received. We didn't have it. We prayed for wisdom and then we had it. I wish life worked like this all of the time but I think a key part of the story was that we knew how desperate we were. This was not a prayer for generic guidance and direction. We had nothing and we knew it. God had everything and we knew that. So we asked him to supply our need.

This is the kind of desperation we need when reading and studying the Bible. Now I don't mean to scare you off and make you think that the Bible is so difficult to understand that you get discouraged about it. There is a lot of clarity in the word of God but even that is understood by us because we have the Holy Spirit within us. But we also need to pray for wisdom, revelation and enlightened hearts—for ourselves and for those we shepherd.

3. Shepherds are not content with the present level of faith and love of their people. Paul wrote, *For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers,* Do you see what he was saying here? He prayed for them *because* of their faith in Christ and love for one another. He wasn't praying for them because they were struggling so greatly—although he certainly would have done that. When he wrote his letters to the church in Corinth, you can tell that they were struggling with all kinds of issues. There was divisiveness, immaturity, sexual immorality. The church in Corinth was a mess for a long time. But the church in Ephesus was doing better than the church in Corinth. He prayed for them not because they were struggling so much but because they were doing so well. They were thriving and he wanted more for them. That's why I am saying that he was not content with their present level of faith and love. He wanted more for them—much more.

Now there's a delicate balance here because contentment is a huge need for believers. A lack of contentment is at the heart of so many problems. If you are not content you are likely to gossip and covet. If you are not content you will have very little joy. If you are not content you will feel like God is not enough. A lack of contentment makes you feel like there's always something missing. There's always some hole in your life, some empty feeling that you can't seem to satisfy. That's a lack of contentment. That's obviously not where we want to be.

So when I say that shepherds are not content with the present level of faith and love of their people I don't mean that we should always be disappointed in them. On the contrary. Paul was grateful for their faith in Jesus and their love for one another. In fact, their spiritual maturity in

these areas was the foundation of his prayers for them. *For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you.* The fact that they had progressed as far as they had was the very reason he wanted them to progress further still. So Paul was content with their maturity but he was not complacent. He was glad for their faith in Jesus and love for one another but he knew that was not the end, but rather just the beginning.

Do you see the difference between contentment and complacency? This is an extremely important point. Without contentment, you are in big trouble. A lack of contentment just shows that you also lack gratitude. Gratitude grows your contentment and joy and an absence of gratitude kills contentment and joy. But it's a hard balance to strike. How can you be perfectly content but also realize that you really are a work in progress? How can you be truly grateful for where God has brought you so far while still realizing that you have so far to go? It's a delicate balance. If you err on one side of the fence you will not find contentment and if you err on the other side of the fence you will become complacent. You will be stuck spiritually.

This is true for yourself but it's also true for those you shepherd. Think about your own kids. As their parent, you know their shortcomings more than anyone else. You know how far they have come and you especially know how far they have to go. So when you look at that you can get discouraged. You wonder how you will train the selfishness out of them. The short answer is, you won't. But you can take them further. Most parents don't have issues with complacency. They want their kids to change and they try to change their kids. Most parents don't have issues with complacency but we can struggle with contentment in our children. The frustration we feel with them does not leave room for contentment.

It's not easy to maintain a balance between contentment and complacency, but it is necessary and I believe this is what Paul was thinking. And keep in mind he was praying this for the whole church. "Because I have heard about **your** faith in the Lord Jesus and love toward all the saints." The "your" was all of them. I think this is fascinating because it means that the church as a whole in Ephesus had a reputation. They were known for their faith and their love. And this was great because they were still a very young church. Paul planted the church in Ephesus about AD 52 and then he wrote this letter about AD 60, which means the church was no more than about eight years old. They were still a baby church yet he was commending their faith and love. As far as a church goes, they were in elementary school but were progressing very well.

I can really relate to how Paul feels when it comes to shepherding a young church. If you have been around our church for any length of time you know how I feel about this body. As I have said many times, I would not want to be doing anything else and I would not want to be doing anywhere else. I commend you for your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for one another. Entire churches do have reputations. There is a culture to a local church that develops. Obviously the strength of an entire church is no better than the sum of its parts. Everyone here is at a slightly different spiritual level of maturity but as a whole, there is faith and love here.

Now in the first few years of our church in many ways we were not a very friendly group. There was love and faith but we were not great at welcoming new people. Again, it was a culture thing. There have always been friendly people but not very many people were especially friendly to

new people. But now I often hear from new visitors that we are a friendly church. Again, not every last person is this way and there's always room for growth, but as a whole body we have become a lot more friendly than we used to be.

The church in Ephesus was full of faith and love but Paul wanted more for them. He was very content with them but he was not complacent. For an elementary age church, they were doing very well, but what happened to them thirty years later? Do you remember? John recorded Jesus' words in Revelation chapter two.

*I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first (Revelation 2:2-4).*

So thirty years later they had gone backwards. They had lost their first love. Paul had wanted them to go deeper. And if by God's enlightening grace you can understand the teaching of this book, things like being chosen, predestination, redemption, grace, mystery of his will, inheritance, sovereign purpose and will, you will grow. There will be more faith in Jesus and there will be more love for one another. So you can either move forward or you'll move backward. But where you start is really important. If you start at a place of contentment, you won't be bogged down by discouragement and you are more likely to take the next steps.

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