

The Favor of God, Ephesians 1:1-2

Awed by God #1

◆Intro: We have such technology, so many avenues of social media, tweets, Facebook messages, pokes, hash browns... er hashtags. Estimates say that 205 billion email messages are sent per day. That means almost 2.4 million emails are sent every second and some 74 trillion emails are sent per year. Lets wander back to the past. Does anyone remember... letters? I guess email resembles the letters of yesteryear. There are still the “From -subject-date-To” rows at the top. You can still create signatures at the bottom. So maybe as you begin to read the Book of Ephesians, you’ll notice that it’s a letter.

◆From: Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus.

◆To: the saints at Ephesus (and probably several churches in Galatia)

◆subject: Greetings!

◆I know it seems simple but as we begin our study lets take the time to observe something we might skip over, because after all, of all the letters being sent around the world, here’s one that the largest religious body on the face of the planet has held onto for about 2000 years as having carried the very truth of God himself! There’s good news here.

◆**1. The letter to the Ephesians shows me that I have God’s special attention in my life!**

◆That’s right. God is interested enough in your life to have written to you. Paul is contacting the Christians in Ephesus on behalf of God. Do you know what “apostle” means? “Sent one.” Paul, a sent one of Christ Jesus (v1). He goes one step further: “by the will of God.” (I don’t know why but I hear John Belushi’s voice when I read that.) By the way, Ephesians men-

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tions the “will of God” more than any other NT letter. This is a book enthralled by the power and person of a sovereign God who exercises his will in the world. His good will.

◆“Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.” Isaiah 46:9, 10, NIV.

◆“This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?” Isaiah 14:26, 27, NIV.

◆Now Paul continues and shows that those who seek God are in fact specially set aside for his good will. Look: *“to the saints at Ephesus”*. Who does he mean? Is St. Mary in Ephesus? How about St. Joseph? St. Bernard? Is Paul writing to great, dead people who humans remember and sculpture in stone to prop up on their ceramic terrace or church yard? No not really. Paul is calling the followers of God saints! The greek term means “set apart as holy ones”. Try this on for size; if you are a believer in Jesus, turn to someone near you and introduce yourself like this: “Hi, I’m saint _____ (fill in your name.) Go ahead. Try it a moment. Feels a little weird doesn’t it? I mean if your name is Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John it doesn’t feel so odd, but what about St. Lisa, or St. Bob? St. A-a-ron, or St. Belake? St. Dee-nice? But don’t miss it. Every Christian is taken by the hand of God and set apart, a treasure to last into eternity. You need to

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know that when you open your heart to God and invite his leadership in your life, you are immediately sheltered. A lot of stuff in this life stinks, but your future is secure.

◆B. So, it is God who's sending a greeting here. Paul's words are so oft' repeated in the church that sometimes we don't hear them anymore.

"Grace and peace to you."

◆Ok, remember those Christmas letters a bunch of us probably sent off last month? You know the ones. You describe your boring life in more flowery terms than usual. How endlessly challenging you find your job. How your kids all can speak two languages even though they're not out of first grade. And how your older children have won all the awards in the country by now and will probably be All-American somethings. And of course, how deeply humbled you are by it all. Yeah, those letters. If you've ever gotten one you know what I mean. Anyway, how do they start? Usually like

◆"Greetings from northwest Iowa!" or

◆"Hello from the sunny state of MI"... no wait... there's no sun in MI around Christmas!

◆Hello, Good day, greetings: all expressions of a bit of good will of the writer toward the recipient, right? But you will notice that Paul's letter is different on that score. He greets them for God! "*Grace and peace to you from God.*"

◆What does that tell you? It tells you it's God on the phone. You've got mail from heaven. Listen folks. A lot of people believe in God, but never progress far on the road of walking with God. God is a communicating

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God. God has things to say to you. I'm urging you to work at hearing him.

The very existence of letters like Ephesians point to this truth.

◆“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.” Hebrews 1:1, 2, NIV.

◆We can learn to hear from God, but it takes practice. It takes regular times of stillness and quiet. It takes the habit of prayer (we talk about that in our 201 class Discovering Spiritual Maturity).

◆God's kids have the applause of God. Listen to this story from Wayne Cordeiro... (reading)

◆Why do we applaud a toddlers concert? Because it's our kid! We know our kid. We can tell her from across the room when the whole class comes filing in in the dim lighting because we know how she walks. We know our kid! Well that's how it is for a child of God too. God scans the stage of the world and can pick out his kids from the complication of creation. He loves to watch them. They have his attention.

◆Ok, next. Lets unpack what the attention of God means. You find it in those terms “grace and peace”

◆**2. God's kids have underserved favor, and universal flourishing.**

◆A. When you hear “Grace be to you” you are hearing something just a tad different from a typical first century letter. The standard greeting was, χαρειν , or “have joy”. But Paul changes it slightly to χαρις, or “have grace: undeserved favor!” Paul wants to locate the possibility of our joy in the

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pure liquid good will of God toward his people. Remembering grace, is to consistently know that what we have is more than we deserve. In fact some folks use choose to recall this truth by responding to “How are ya?” with “Better than I deserve.” It’s a good reminder. We easily feel entitled, as though life should be peaches and cream, and our car should always start, and we should always have a “good hair day.” Quick answer? Ain’t so. Human life is a moral reality, people. Human life affects creation. And your spiritual state affects your physical existence. These things are bound. And if we got what we deserved... well, there would be more cancer than there is, less sunlight, and ice cream would taste like wood. My point is that the beauties we take for granted are grace. Grace from God.

◆“He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” Matthew 5:45, NIV.

◆C. Our world articulates life poorly in this realm. We constantly hear things like, “Every child deserves a good home.” Or “Our business strives for excellence because you deserve better!” Sounds nice, I know. But it’s flat untrue. A child does not deserve a good home. A child ought to have a good home because that is right, and in line with God’s design. But not because he deserves it. We speak sloppily. A business ought to strive for excellence because excellence honors the God who made us and benefits others, but not because we deserve it. Count your graces, friends. Can you walk? It is grace. Can you sing? It is grace. Have you eaten? It is grace. We are not worthy of it. In light of this reality of grace, we are more likely to be at peace even in difficulty.

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◆“Peace” in Paul’s greeting is the Hebrew counterpart to the standard Greek greeting. So Paul is covering both. But as every Hebrew would know, “peace” is not spoken like a flower child from the 1970’s. No. Shalom (peace) to a Hebrew was universal flourishing, or wholeness, or “the way things ought to be.” That’s what peace meant.

◆As the great writing prophets of the Bible knew, sin has a thousand faces. The prophets knew how many ways human life can go wrong because they knew how many ways human life can go right. (You need the concept of a wall on plumb to tell when one is off.) These prophets kept dreaming of a time when God would put things right again.

◆They dreamed of a new age in which human crookedness would be straightened out, rough places made plain. The foolish would be made wise, and the wise, humble. They dreamed of a time when the deserts would flower, the mountains would run with wine, weeping would cease, and people could go to sleep without weapons on their laps. People would work in peace and work to fruitful effect. Lambs could lie down with lions. And nature would be fruitful, benign, and filled with wonder upon wonder; all humans would be knit together in brotherhood and sisterhood; and all nature and all humans would look to God, walk with God, lean toward God, and delight in God. Shouts of joy and recognition would well up from valleys and seas, from women in streets and from men on ships.

◆The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in (justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, shalom means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight* -a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder at its Creator and Savior who opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.

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◆ This vision of Grace and Peace is at the core of Ephesians. In the first three chapters Paul proclaims the gospel doctrine of God's cosmic rule over everyone and everything, the underserved favor human beings have in his eyes because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Chapters 1-3 are a breath-taking litany of all that God is and does. In the last three chapters he applies this favored way to human life and the affects God's church can have on community, reconciling of races, the making of good marriage, the forming of strong homes, and even the overcoming of demonic forces exerting pressure on our faltering lives. That's what it means to have God's attention. He changes the way we do life.

◆ 3. What about my troubles?

◆ I'd like to remind us as we study this beautiful writing that Paul wrote it from prison. He's not on a comfy couch, sipping a latte, or staring from his cottage window in serene gratefulness. His is a steel gratefulness as he faces the promise of the Roman counterpart to Nazi death camps. So don't get it mixed up as though Paul is about to tell us how we can magically ensure for ourselves a life of bliss and prosperity.

◆ A. Following God is not a guarantee of ease or the promise of pleasure. But let me ask you this. Have you something in you that can endure the dark of night? Could you sound the tones of hope and rejoicing if you were in prison? Saeed Abedini is an Iranian American Christian pastor who was imprisoned in Iran. He was detained in Iran in the summer of 2012 and initially incarcerated in Evin Prison in September 2012. On January 27, 2013, he was sentenced to eight years in prison, reportedly on charges of undermining national security through private religious gatherings in Christian

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homes in Iran in the early 2000s. A resident of Idaho, Pastor Saeed was just released after 3 years in prison in Iran. I wonder to myself how I would have lasted in prison. Are we to be fatalistic with this talk of the unchangeable will of God? Understand, grace and peace are not so much about comfort as about character. Not so much about having what we want as having what is good.

◆ We are talking about what enables Christians to lose a child without losing their minds. Or what enables a family to lose their house, without ruining their home. Or what enables someone to experience peace where there is no stereo or toaster. Do want to know that?

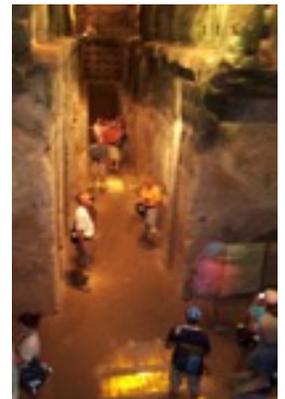
Then join us and sign on with Jesus!

◆ Conclusion:

◆ Some years ago, when visiting the land of Israel, we got to see some ancient site in Jerusalem, including ancient post office. Much like our post office boxes, we observed a lattice

work of cubby holes carved neatly out of a flat stone wall. What was curious was that the boxes were all so high in the air, about 2 sto-

ries up! (Here's a picture). You guessed it maybe from the bird droppings that covered everything. Mail in those days was by pigeon. Or maybe we should say, SMS was by pigeon. If it was a lengthy letter you had to carry it by hand.



People are the most communicating creatures on the planet. 2.4 million emails are sent every second. Can you imagine how many text messages? We get that trait from our Dad.

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◆“We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”
2 Peter 1:16-21, NIV.

◆He is a communicating God. He has written us in the past and whenever we re-read his mail, the Holy Spirit speaks into us again. You can learn to hear him.