

Becoming Who We Are – The Book of Ephesians

Greetings to the Saints

Ephesians 1:1-2

Mark Vroegop

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:1-2 ESV).

February and April have been identity changing months in my life.

The reason is that Sarah and I celebrated the birth of two grandchildren. I've talked with many of you about it, and it really is an incredible experience seeing your children care for their own children. But, if I'm honest, I'm still getting used to the name "Grandpa."

There's a lot to that name. First, it's one of the last title changes. The next stops are great grandpa and deceased. Secondly, I don't feel old enough to be a grandpa. I'm not sure what age I had in mind, and I'm so thankful. But when I hear the name "Grandpa," I don't see a 52-year-old. Third, and most dramatically, is the issue of what name I would be called. Somewhere I missed the class on this thing. As soon as people learned about the coming of grandchildren, I was asked what my name would be. At first, I had no idea what they were talking about.

It was a lot of pressure! I mean, do I want something cool like "Big G" or something endearing like "Pops" or something historic like the Dutch title of "Grootvader." But that sounded like my lost son was Luke, and I lived on the Death Star.

I even had some of our church staff try to help me. One person developed a Google Doc with a force-ranking of names.

It's a bit funny, but the name thing, along with getting used to this new role, was stressful. Sarah and I talked about it all the time, especially when our first grandson was born. Finally, one of my sons asked an insightful, penetrating, and liberating question: "Are you opposed to 'Grandpa'?" "No!" I said, "I don't know what to do." And he said, "Just go with that for now."

Suddenly, the pressure lifted! All that time thinking through what I would be called led me to "Grandpa."

Identity Issue

Now that whole experience makes me smile, and it really is a delightful thing to consider. But consider what's underneath the question of a name. It's the issue of identity.

A name reflects and creates an identity. Underneath the “name question” is what kind of grandpa do I want to be? How do I want to be known? What will others think of my name? But that’s not just true when it comes to being a grandpa, it’s true in many other areas.

It’s why we make such a big deal out of titles. Adding director, partner, doctor, RN, Mr., or Mrs. to your name says something. One of my favorite moments in a wedding is when I say, “It’s my pleasure to introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. _____.” But we also have other identity markers: gamer, techy, influencer, coffee-snob, cheese-head, Republican, Democrat, evangelical, ex-evangelical. You get the point.

It probably wouldn’t surprise you to learn that identity issues are an important and increasingly challenging issue. Besides all the things I mentioned previously, we have gender identity, sexual identity issues, and identity politics. Identity is a really important issue.

From a Christian standpoint, the issue of identity involves three questions: 1) Who is God? 2) Who am I? and 3) Who is with me? How you answer these questions determines your understanding of identity. But even more, it’s how you navigate the world in which you live.

Today we are starting a 28-week series on the book of Ephesians with the aim of more clearly defining the biblical teaching regarding Christian identity. The title is *Becoming Who We Are*. The series will take us through the summer while I’m on sabbatical, and we’ll conclude just before Advent. Next week, Pastor Mitch DePoy will walk us through verses 3-10, as I’ll be preaching at the 5-year anniversary of One Fellowship Church in Pike Township.

Our text for this Sunday is just the first two verses, and I hope to give you a big-picture overview of the entire book. And here’s the theme, not only for the first two verses, but also for the entire book:

God has a plan for righteous people to be faithful as God helps them.

I’m going to use this statement as a fourfold outline to look at these two verses.

1. God Has a Plan

As we take our first step into the book of Ephesians, it’s important to note how prevalent the will of God is to this book and to the first verse. This theme of a plan of God that is behind everything will emerge frequently. It serves as the foundation of the book and our Christian identity.

In the first verse, we read the greeting from Paul who identifies himself as an apostle, someone who personally encountered the Lord Jesus and who spoke with a level of authority. We’ll learn more about Paul’s connection to the church at Ephesus later, but it seems that he wrote this letter around A.D. 60-62 during his imprisonment in Rome. This would have been toward the later part of Paul’s ministry life, and we believe he was martyred sometime between A.D. 64-67.

If you look at the end of the book (6:21), you'll find that Paul sent the letter with a "beloved brother and faithful minister" named Tychicus. Paul sent him for the purpose of providing the church with an update on him and for the purpose of encouraging them.

Unlike other New Testament books like 1 & 2 Corinthians or Galatians, there doesn't appear to be any major issue plaguing the church. No one had arrived with bad news about the church at Ephesus. They appear to be a generally faithful church.

The church was likely planted by the Apostle Paul during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:19). The new converts pleaded with Paul to stay with them, but he moved on with this promise, "I will return to you if God wills" (Acts 18:21). Remember that statement!

Along with Paul, Priscilla and Aquila served the church, and Apollos also visited the city with great fruit (Acts 18:24-25). During Paul's third missionary journey, he spent three years in Ephesus. Apparently, the church and its leaders became very dear to Paul. In fact, as Paul is preparing to leave for Jerusalem, he calls for the church leaders to travel about four days to Miletus.

Acts 20 records the moment. It's a longer text, but it's worth reading because it shows us the heart of the apostle and their affection for Paul.

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part

of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship (Acts 20:17-38).

God has a plan! Do you hear that tone in Paul's last words in Acts 20?

Next week, you'll explore this idea of God's sovereign plan that began before the foundation of the world according to the purpose of his will (Eph. 1:3-4). That's why it makes so much sense that Paul would start his letter to this church with "by the will of God" (v. 1).

Like Romans, the book of Ephesians grounds us in really big and mysterious ideas about God's sovereignty and his control over every event in human history. Ephesians helps us to get a big vision of God. It's a book that shows us the connection between our earthly identity and the divine plan of God.

God has a plan for righteous people to be faithful as God helps them.

2. For Righteous People

The second element of this book to highlight is connected to the phrase "to the saints in Ephesus" (v. 1). This obviously refers to the people to whom Paul is writing this letter. The words "saints" and "Ephesus" are both really important.

Paul is writing to people who have been redeemed by God, to those who have been declared to be righteous, and to those who are holy. Throughout the book of Ephesians, you are going to see this theme of righteousness from two different angles: vertical and horizontal. You could also call it positional and practical holiness.

Paul is going to make the point that to be in Christ means that you have been made righteous. You've been made a saint. And then he's going to demonstrate how to live out that righteousness in practical ways.

The letter follows a classic outline from Paul where he highlights doctrine and then practical living. In chapters 1-3, we learn about the deep and otherworldly spiritual realities that are central to God's plan.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him (Eph. 1:3-4).

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4-7).

And in chapters 4-6, we learn about the practical applications of that righteousness.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called (Eph. 4:1).

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 5:1-2).

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil (Eph. 6:10-11).

One of the keys to understanding Christian identity is the way in which it is rooted in God and lived out with other people. In other words, Christian identity connects your relationship with God to your relationships with other people. Notice how different this is than our cultural understanding of identity. Our world starts with “Who do you think you are? Who do you want to be?” The Bible starts with “God chose you before the foundation of the world.”

In our present context, it would seem that people think they have to feel humble before they are humble. Or that we have to feel love before we actually love people. Christian identity changes the starting point to outside of yourself: “be imitators of God...walk in love as Christ loved us...”

The starting point of Christian identity is embracing the title of “saint.” But isn’t it ironic that we know that isn’t true about us naturally? To be a saint is to be declared something that God says about you. Think about that: the most important thing about yourself is not what you say about yourself, but what God says about you.

God has a plan for righteous people to be faithful as God helps them.

3. To Be Faithful

These saints are identified by their location and their testimony. The text says that they are “in Ephesus” and that they are faithful in Christ Jesus. Where and how they lived is really important. That’s not only true of them, but that’s also true of every Christian.

Christian identity always has a situation in mind. In other words, what you think about your identity (who you are) affects how you live wherever you are.

The city of Ephesus was in the Roman Empire within the province of Asia. Ephesus was a wealthy seaport near major roads, and it featured numerous important civic and entertainment venues like our own capitol building, Lucas Oil Stadium, and the Palladium. The city was famous for the temple of Artemis, or Diana. She was believed to be a fertility goddess, and the temple featured one hundred columns. It was considered one of the seven wonders of the world at the time.

The city’s identity was connected to this temple. But so was the Ephesian economy. Religious tourism and the purchase of temple “swag” was big business. During Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, enough people were converted that it began to affect the idol business. When Christianity affected the bottom line, things got heated. The idol craftsmen said:

And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship (Acts 19:26-27).

That led to a riot where people chanted “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” After cooler heads prevailed, Paul left the city for Macedonia. There was faithful gospel work happening in the city, and it was having an effect. They were faithful in their witness where they lived.

The church in Ephesus is the first of the seven letters in Revelation, and they are commended for their works, toil, and patient endurance (Rev. 2:2). Additionally, they are praised for their discernment and their faithfulness during opposition and growing persecution. This church wasn’t perfect. Remember, they were exhorted to return to the love they had at first (Rev. 2:4), but they were faithful.

Every church needs to determine how to be faithful in their generation, in their context, and in their community. John Stott says:

Many of our spiritual troubles arise from our failure to remember that we are citizens of two kingdoms. We tend either to pursue Christ and withdraw from the world, or to become preoccupied with the world and forget that we are also in Christ.¹

Individual Christians need to prayerfully discern what faithfulness looks like. Knowing who you are is essential because while everything around you changes or challenges you, identity becomes the way that you navigate your way through it. And it’s not just something that you do individually. It’s something we pursue together—becoming who we are!

God has a plan for righteous people to be faithful as God helps them.

4. As God Helps Them

This letter begins with a common spiritual greeting: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” These words, grace and peace, are important and frequent words in the book of Ephesians. Jesus is our peace (2:14) by making peace with his cross (2:15). It is by grace that we are saved (2:8-9).

Peace is what marks the life of the Christian. Grace is the means by which it happens.

But as important and central as those words are, my point is connected to the word “from.” Grace and peace are amazing, but they cannot be found in yourself or even the church collectively. They come from God. Grace and peace are the spiritual resources that are like a tether connecting you to God. It’s

¹ John R. W. Stott, [*God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 23.

our spiritual lifeline. Grace and peace from God help us to see the bookends of the message of Ephesians.

On the one hand, God is the one who has the plan before the foundation of the world to save his people. But on the other hand, he's also the one from whom all spiritual resources flow. Grace and peace are from him.

God has a plan for righteous people to be faithful as God helps them.

So, if you are not a Christian, you must understand that salvation means receiving something from God. You must trust in Jesus and receive grace and forgiveness. That's the starting point, not only of reconciliation, but also of a completely new identity.

And, if you are a Christian, this means such deep rest within your soul. Your identity is based upon the plan of a sovereign God, and it is sustained by the constant provision of God's gracious help.

Christian identity (becoming who we are) is connected to a big view of God, a biblical view of yourself, and a practical view of life.

God has a plan for righteous people to be faithful as God helps them.

As I was writing this sermon, I kept hearing the song "Oh the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus" in my head. The words fit so well:

Oh-oh the deep, deep love of Jesus
Vast unmeasured, boundless, free
Rolling as a mighty ocean
In its fullness over me

Underneath me, all around me
Is the current of His love
Leading onward, leading homeward to
Thy glorious rest above

Yes! We are becoming who we are!

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com