

Background notes on the text: It is believed that the church in Ephesus was established by Priscilla and Aquilla. Apollos and John the Baptist are also associated with Ephesus. Paul came later and is known to have organized Ephesus as a missionary center for Asia Minor. Paul’s ministry and the main theme of Ephesians is to reveal God’s plan to reconcile Jews and Gentiles, which was accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is understood in Ephesians that God’s purpose is not only human reconciliation, but also unity and harmony in the universe. The church, “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” with Christ as its head, is the means of accomplishing that purpose. That is quite a task for the church! Fortunately, God does not leave disciples, apostles, and prophets empty handed. God is present in love, power, strength, courage, grace, faith, and hope.

It is clear in this text we are about to read that there is a change embodied from a before to an after. What is before is divided and sinful and what is after is redemption and unity. God is the effect that causes the change. I can hear Paul, “Once I was dead but now, I am alive. Once I was world bound but now, I am heaven bound.”

Read Ephesians 2:1-10

A few one-liners to get us started this morning:

God loves everyone, but probably prefers 'fruits of the spirit' over 'religious nuts!'

God promises a safe landing, not a calm passage. The task ahead of us is never as great as the Power behind us.

The Will of God never takes you to where the Grace of God will not protect you.

We don't change the message; the message changes us.

The good news of the gospel can be shared in three words: **God’s Grace Wins**. The story takes a few more words: God creates humanity out of love. Humanity turns away from God by sinning through following their own way. God wants to make the relationship right again, so God gives humanity the gift of grace to save humanity from their sins, help them grow in their faith, and live a life of hope beyond this world. In full summary, faith in God’s grace leads to being a champion in life.

The message from Ephesians is one of the most fundamental theological descriptions of what it means to be Christian. The key words are grace and faith, as we understand them to be the change agents of God working in and through us for redemption and unity.

We cannot be Christian unless we are rooted in grace and faith. God's grace as a gift to us partnered with our faith in God as a gift in return to God creates the most powerful duo ever known. We can call grace and faith together our saving grace. Salvation from a life in *Sheol* and the depths of eternal struggle and division is something we all hope for, right? We long to be saved and delivered to a life in heaven and the heights of eternal glory and unity. This redemption and salvation we long for is a gift made available to us by our loving God activated fully in our individual hearts and minds by God as we place our trust and faith in God. Unlike our human nature would fight for, our salvation is not a trophy or promotion or accolade, earned by our works and accomplishments. Our salvation is a gift from God despite our human tendencies.

One of the most asked questions after hearing this theological claim is "So it doesn't matter then what I do in life? If I just have faith in God, I will get God's grace and be saved?" The complicated answer is yes and no. I say yes because I believe God has the power to do anything. I also believe God's grace is unconditional and eternal. God wants nothing more than to be reunited with all of humanity in harmony and I believe God will do whatever it takes to make that happen. We may not fully understand why or how the criminal on the cross next to Jesus was saved, but that is the power of God's grace. But I also must say no because it is not that simple or trivial. You see, when we have faith in God, we make room for God's grace, and God's grace is such that when we make room for it, we can't help but be changed and empowered to be and do what is faithful to God. God's grace is a powerful and never-ending gift that keeps on giving through us, transforming our works to be God working in us and not our efforts to earn more from God. When we fully open ourselves to the power of God's grace, we will not find ourselves wanting to skim by on the basics just to reap a reward through as little work as possible. God's grace invites us into the ministry of God's work and empowers us to dive headfirst and go all in.

Let us look for a minute at unpacking what grace looks like played out in life.

In the movie *Ironweed*, Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep stumble across an old Eskimo woman lying in the snow. The two debate what they should do about her. *Nicholson asks, "Is she drunk or a bum?" "Just a bum. Been one all her life." "And before that?" "She was a prostitute in Alaska." "She hasn't been a prostitute all her life. Before that?" "I dunno. Just a little kid, I guess." "Well, a little kid's something. It is not a bum and it is not a prostitute. It is something. Let us take her in."* This is looking at someone through the lens of grace. Where society saw only a bum and prostitute, grace saw "a little kid," a person made in the image of God no matter how defaced that image had become.

"Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue." (Eugene O'Neill)

One of my favorite books about grace, that is beyond the Bible, is Philip Yancey's book "What's so amazing about Grace?" I appreciate his writing style and the stories he shares.

In 1987, an IRA bomb buried Gordon Wilson and his 20-year-old daughter beneath 5 ft. of rubble. Gordon alone survived. And forgave. He said of the bombers, "I have lost my daughter, but I bear no grudge... I shall pray, tonight and every night, that God will forgive them." His words caught the media's ear and out of one man's grief the world got a glimpse of grace.

Grace is the church's great distinctive. It is the one thing the world cannot duplicate and the one thing it craves above all else- for only grace can bring hope and transformation to a jaded world.

Time and time again, grace has been tested. Even in the darkest of times dealing with the darkest of evils, grace has prevailed.

Grace does not excuse wrong but treasures the wrongdoer. True grace is shockingly scandalous. It shakes our conventions with its insistence on getting close to evil and touching it with mercy and hope.

In the world of grace, the word deserve does not apply. "There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less."

Now let us look closer at being rooted in faith. For this I have a story to share.

David Morse was an American missionary to India who became great friends there with a pearl-diver, Rambhau. Morse spent many evenings in Rambhau's cabin reading to him from the Bible, and explaining to him God's way of salvation.

Rambhau enjoyed listening to the Word of God, but whenever the missionary tried to get Rambhau to accept Christ as his Savior – he would shake his head and reply, "Your Christian way to heaven is too easy for me! I cannot accept it. If ever I should find admittance to heaven in that manner – I would feel like a pauper there... like a beggar who has been let in out of pity. I may be proud – but I want to deserve, I want to earn my place in heaven – and so I am going to work for it."

Nothing the missionary could say seemed to have any effect on Rambhau's decision, and so quite a few years slipped by. One evening, however, the missionary heard a knock on his door, and upon opening it he found Rambhau there. "Come in, dear friend," said Morse.

“No,” said the pearl-diver. “I want you to come with me to my house for a short time — I have something to show you. Please do not say ‘No’.” “Of course I’ll come,” replied the missionary. As they neared his house, Rambhau said: “In a week’s time I start working for my place in heaven; I am leaving for Delhi — and I am going there on my knees.”

“Man, you are crazy! It’s nine hundred miles to Delhi, and the skin will break on your knees, and you will have blood-poisoning or leprosy before you get to Bombay.” “No, I must get to Delhi,” affirmed Rambhau, “and the immortals will reward me for it! The suffering will be sweet — for it will purchase heaven for me!”

“Rambhau, my friend — you can’t. How can I bear you to do it — when Jesus Christ has suffered and died to purchase heaven for you!” But the old man could not be moved. “You are my dearest friend on earth. Through all these years you have stood by me in sickness, in want — you have been sometimes my only friend. But even you cannot turn me from my desire to purchase eternal bliss...I must go to Delhi!”

Rambhau left the room to return soon with a small but heavy English strongbox. “I have had this box for years and I keep only one thing in it. Now I will tell you about it. I once had a son...” “A son! Why, Rambhau, you have never before said a word about him!” “No, I couldn’t.” Even as he spoke Rambhau’s eyes were moistened.

“Now I must tell you, for soon I will leave, and who knows whether I shall ever return? My son was a diver too. He was the best pearl diver on the coasts of India. He had the swiftest dive, the keenest eye, the strongest arm, the longest breath of any man who ever sought for pearls. What joy he brought to me! Most pearls, as you know, have some defect or blemish only the expert can discern, but my boy always dreamed of finding the ‘perfect’ pearl — one beyond all that was ever found. One day he found it! But even when he saw it — he had been under water too long... That pearl cost him his life, for he died soon after.”

Rambhau bowed his head. For a moment, his whole body shook, but there was no sound. “All these years,” he continued, “I have kept this pearl — but now I am going, not to return, and to you, my best friend — I am giving my pearl.”

Rambhau worked the combination on the strongbox and drew from it a carefully wrapped package. Gently opening the cotton, he picked up a mammoth pearl and placed it in Morse’s hand. It was one of the largest pearls ever found off the coast of India and glowed with a luster and brilliance never seen in cultured pearls. It would have brought a fabulous sum in any market. For a moment, Morse was speechless and gazed with awe. “Rambhau! What a pearl!” “That pearl is perfect,” replied Rambhau quietly.

Morse looked up quickly with a new thought: Was not this the very opportunity and occasion he had prayed for – to make Rambhau understand the value of Christ’s sacrifice? So, he said, designedly, “Rambhau, this is a wonderful pearl, an amazing pearl. Let me buy it. I would give you ten thousand dollars for it.” “What do you mean?” “Well, I will give you fifteen thousand dollars for it, or if it takes more – I will work for it.”

Stiffening his whole body Rambhau said, “This pearl is beyond price. No man in all the world has money enough to pay what this pearl is worth to me. On the market a million dollars could not buy it. I will not sell it to you. You may only have it as a gift.” “No, Rambhau, I cannot accept that. As much as I want the pearl, I cannot accept it that way. Perhaps I am proud, but that is too easy. I must pay for it, or work for it...”

Rambhau was stunned. “You don’t understand at all. Don’t you see. My only son gave his life to get this pearl, and I would not sell it for any money. It’s worth is in the life-blood of my son. I cannot sell this – but I can give it to you. Just accept it in token of the love I bear you.” Morse was choked, and for a moment could not speak. Then he gripped the hand of the old man. “Rambhau,” he said in a low voice, “don’t you see? My words are just what you have been saying to God all the time.”

Rambhau looked long and searchingly at Morse, and slowly, slowly he began to understand. “God is offering you salvation as a free gift. It is so great and priceless that no man on earth can buy it. Millions of dollars are too little. No man on earth could earn it. His life would be millions of years too short. No man is good enough to deserve it. It cost God the life-blood of His only Son to make the entrance for you into heaven. In a million years, in a hundred pilgrimages, you could not earn that entrance. All you can do is to accept it as a token of God’s love for you.”

“Rambhau, of course I will accept the pearl in deep humility, praying to God that I may be worthy of your love. Won’t you accept God’s great gift of heaven, too, in deep humility, knowing it cost Him the death of His Son to offer it to you?”

Great tears were now rolling down Rambhau’s cheeks. The veil was beginning to lift. “I see it now. I have believed in the doctrine of Jesus for the last two years, but I could not believe that His salvation was free. Now I understand. Some things are too priceless to be bought or earned. I will accept His salvation!”

Our faith in God is a life or death matter. The good news of the gospel says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

Let all God’s people say... Amen.