

**Look what GOD has done!
Ephesians 1**

Well brothers and sisters, it is the first Sunday of the New Year, so I am going to begin my message this morning with the standard and expected opening question that pastors all across North America are asking their congregation today... and that is *“What are your New Year’s resolutions?”*

And then perhaps they will move on to talk about the kinds of resolutions that most of us make each year: manage our money better, spend more time with the family, eat healthier, exercise more and of course – lose some weight.

Then comes the acknowledgment that while we have good intentions about keeping these resolutions, the reality is that within a few weeks or months they have fallen by the wayside.

And then the pastor might use this to transition into talking about why our spirit is willing but our flesh is weak; or to question if our resolutions are really tackling the root of our

problems... I know because I’ve done these kinds of New Year’s messages many times.

But something I have never done for a New Year’s sermon is ask the question *“What are God’s New Year’s Resolutions?”* or more specifically *“What are God’s resolutions for you and I as a part of Valleyview for this coming year?”*

And that is what we need to be asking this morning – not because there is something wrong with reflecting on our own New Year’s resolutions – but because this is what has come from studying the first chapter of the book of Ephesians and listening to what God is saying in it.

Brothers and sisters, when we take the time to dig into the scriptures and study them and understand what God is saying, it changes the questions we are asking – and it raises new questions about other issues that we hadn’t even thought of before.

So, we are starting off the New Year by working our way through the book of Ephesians, all six chapters of it, over the next two months – because this is a letter that was specifically written by the Apostle Paul - for us at Valleyview.

Now I know what you're thinking: "vs 1 says '*To God's holy people in Ephesus*' not Valleyview... and besides I'm not sure if I really qualify as "*holy*" that's kind of why I've made some of the New Year's resolutions that I did..."

But brothers and sisters, as I dug in and studied this book of Ephesians I discovered that the earliest and most reliable copies that we have of this letter are not addressed to the Ephesians, and what the bible scholars have determined from this... is that it was a circular letter that Apostle Paul intended for distribution amongst a whole bunch of churches.

And because of Paul's official position as Apostle to the Gentiles, and through the work of the Holy Spirit over the ages in preserving this letter and including it in scripture, it IS intended for us as well, God's Holy People here in Valleyview.

So what this means is that Ephesians is sort of a Christianity 101 or Christian Doctrine and Living for Dummies - it wasn't written to a specific church that was dealing with a specific problem offering a specific solution and instruction.

It was intended to give those who had become connected to a local church as a new believer an introduction to the Christian faith and some general instruction on the basics of living as a Christian from the one whom Jesus Christ had specifically called to be their Apostle.

So what it has to say to us is not only important – it is authoritative, we not only need to pay attention to it, we need to bring ourselves in line with it, that's why I said that when we study the scriptures it changes the questions we ask.

And because it's so important for us to receive, I want to encourage you to read it on your own time as well. Its' not hard... we're going to look at chapters 1,2,3 over the next three weeks and then spend two weeks each on chapters 4,5 and then finish off chapter 6 on the last Sunday in Feb.

So if you take just 5 minutes out of your day - in the morning, or at lunch break, or after supper or before you go to bed... and read 4 verses of the chapter we are focusing on, you will have read the whole chapter in preparation for Sunday.

And don't worry if you don't understand everything – some of that will get addressed as we go through the chapter on the Sunday or you can just email me ask me about it – I'll most certainly have covered what you're wondering about as I'm reading and studying up on the chapter.

So please turn with me to Ephesians 1 and let's dig into this important letter to us.

Now this letter follows the standard format for letters of its time – just like today we would compose a letter by writing it on our personal stationary or company letterhead, the first line of vs. 1 is the Apostle Paul's letterhead and it says *“Paul an Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God”*

And then the recipients of the letter are identified – we happened to have a later copy that was addressed to God's Holy people in Ephesus but as I mentioned this was a circular letter and it essentially left open for whichever church it was being circulated to. Today we might say something like *“To whom it may concern;”*

And then just like we would start a letter by writing *“How are you, I hope you are doing well and in good health”* Paul offers a similar – though much more substantial Apostolic greeting of *“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Then, since this letter would be read to the believers as they gathered for worship together, Paul offers a lengthy doxology of praise starting in vs. 3 through to vs. 14 where he praises God the Father, and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit by describing the work that each person of the Trinity has accomplished in bringing salvation into this world.

Then, after this opening section of praise – which would be very appropriate for worship – Paul continues his liturgical accommodation in composing this letter and moves into a prayer of thanksgiving and intercession throughout vs. 15-23 and that concludes the first chapter of this letter.

Now as we read through this first chapter, you might feel a bit overwhelmed by all the content that Paul has included in his greeting, his doxology and his prayer – like getting a drink from a firehose perhaps.

The first few verses were ok – right up to the point where Paul says that God has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. But then, while we are still mulling that over in our minds, Paul launches into talking about predestination, adoption into son-ship, redemption, the mystery of God’s will and the fulfillment of times and everything under heaven and earth being unified together in Jesus Christ!

That’s deep stuff - and he’s only halfway finished... he still has his prayer to go.

Now we might be tempted to say “*whoa- slow down Paul – just give us the basics, we’re not super-theological people like you are... why don’t you just give us something practical that we can use in my everyday life as Christians...*”

But remember – Paul wrote this letter to be an introduction, a primer, an orientation for people with no Christian background what so-ever, who had just become part of the local church as new Christians – so if PAUL thought THIS is what THEY needed to know, then surely WE also need to know it as well – after all this letter is intended for us too!

Besides, grasping and understanding all of this material is precisely what Paul is praying for. He writes that keeps asking God to give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that we may know God better and that the eyes of our hearts would be enlightened so we may know these things. (vs. 17-18)

And as God answers Paul’s prayer in this letter, this scripture changes our questions and brings up other issues that we hadn’t thought about before and puts them before us and

says “Here – this is more important, deal with this first – the practical stuff will come later on.”

So let’s dig into this deep, super-theological material that Paul considers to be what a new Christian needs introducing to.

And the key to understanding it, the thread which weaves the whole first chapter together, is to look for what God is doing and what God has done. So let’s do that.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God’s holy people in Ephesus the faithful in Christ Jesus: ² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he

purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment— to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. ¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit....

¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

I don’t know about you – but when I go through this chapter specifically looking for what God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are doing – somehow and it all comes together, I seem to understand it better.

But it becomes overwhelmingly evident that God is doing a whole lot of things - He made Paul an Apostle, He blesses us in Christ, He predestines us, He freely gives to us, He makes known to us, He puts things into effect, He works all things out, He marks us, He calls us, He raised Christ, He seated Christ at his right hand, He places all things under His feet, He appoints Christ...

And after seeing all that God is doing – this is what made me think; *“I should be asking what God’s New Year’s resolutions are?”* What is God going to do this year?

And I think the answer to that question comes from vs. 4 *“For he chose us in him [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”*

Brothers and sisters we may not fully understand all the depths and nuances of what Paul introduces to new Christians in this chapter – and why would we, especially if we are new Christians – but we can certainly understand that God is the one who is doing all these things.

And once we understanding that God is doing these things... we start to understand that Paul isn’t just being theological for the sake of discussing abstract concepts that are academic and vague – esp. for new believers and members of a church...

No – Paul is giving a clear and articulate description of what new believers and new members of a church have started to experience God doing in their own lives, and He is giving them the correct vocabulary to express, explain and understand it. Does that make sense?

You see brothers and sisters when God does stuff... we are impacted by it, it has an effect upon our lives, but we don’t always know how to explain it or describe it – or how to fully understand it or what the larger context of it is.

What Paul is doing here is very practical as it relates to understanding the experience of what God is doing.

It would have been very helpful to those Gentiles, who had heard about Jesus and suddenly found themselves wanting to

know more about Jesus... who felt conviction that worshipping another god – like Zeus, or Athena, or Nike (in Ephesus) – was wrong and that they ought to worship Jesus instead... it would be helpful to them to understand why this was happening and what it meant.

Now I could go on describing the experience of an early believer and how this letter would be helpful for them – but it's more important that we reflect on our own experiences.

How did you experience God doing stuff in your life? Did you go through some sort of crisis that caused you to reach out for help? Did you get into some trouble and come to realize there were some terrible parts to who you were that needed fixing?

Were you looking for assurance about what happens after you die or did you find yourself unexplainably attracted to this person called Jesus whom you read about in the scriptures?

And how did you experience yourself coming to be a part of a local church? Did you grow up in the church and so you've

just continued to attend? Were you looking to associate with like-minded people? Were you attracted to the church because it was lively and creative and fun and it offered good programs? Or were you looking for community and acceptance and a place where your kids could learn good morals?

And what is it that continues to bring you here – to be a part of Valleyview?

These are the important questions to reflect on for ourselves brothers and sisters because Paul wants us to know that the answer is God.

It is God working and doing things in this world and in our lives that has resulted in what we have experienced and Paul gives us the proper terms to understand what has happened to us in this opening chapter of Ephesians.

Are you convinced and convicted that Jesus ought to be worshiped, that he was resurrected from the dead?

That's because of God...

Do you have faith in Jesus that His blood offers you forgiveness, and that through his death and resurrection God bought you back from sin and death and the devil?

That's because of God...

Do you put your hope in Jesus Christ, did you believe the message of the gospel, do you believe that you need salvation in Jesus? That is because of God...

Do you know that you are part of God's family, you are adopted into it as a "Son" which means you have an inheritance that is coming to you? That is because of God...

Brothers and sisters the most important thing that Paul wants new believers and new church members to understand at the start of this introduction to being a Christian is that this was God's idea and plan for you... and for the rest of those people who are with you in church.

We go back to God's New Year's resolutions for us in vs. 4 for a summary description of this plan: that God *"chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight"*

And it's actually not a "New Year's resolution" that God has just recently come up with, this is something that comes from God's very nature and character that resulted in His choosing to create this world and you as a part of it!

Brothers and sisters – God is so amazing and great and almighty that He can choose to create all of reality – and the thousands and millions of years that it has existed for, just so that He can bring you, and you, and you, and millions of other people into existence so He can personally work and do stuff to make them Holy and blameless in His sight!

If you want an explanation for life – that is it right there. That is what is really going on in this world – if people say *"things happen for a reason"* this is the articulation of what things are happening and for what reason.

Brothers and sisters it is God's purpose and it has always been His plan for you... for us... to choose us, to predestine us, to redeem us, to forgive us, to adopt us and make us a part of His Church so that one day we are completely holy and blameless.

And the fact that this is something that occurs before we were in existence is Paul's way of telling us that it's not our idea, it's not our initiative and it's not something that we caused to happen to us because of some action or personal quality, or character trait, or capacity that we have. That's why Paul mentions "in Christ" so much throughout this first chapter – it all happens to us "in Christ"

Now why is it so important for us to know this, why is it the first thing that Paul focuses on in this Christianity 101 letter? Because it's important to get off on the right foot brothers and sisters. Like that old Canadian Tire commercial used to say *"Where you end up has a lot to do with where you start out!"*

And if we are going to end up as Holy and Blameless people in God's sight – as God has intended for us - then it's important

for us to realize this as our starting point - as new believers and as new church members, so that we can co-operate and work towards this with God.

Because while the main point of the first chapter is that God is doing all this and God has planned all this and God has initiated all this – WE are involved in it... and God actions call for a response on our part. Like Paul says in vs. 12-13, God's actions result in putting our hope in Jesus, in believing the gospel message, and when God answers Paul's prayer in this chapter it will result in our knowing.

And that deeper knowing moves us to further and greater co-operation with God's initiative towards that Holiness and Blameless goal He has for us in Christ.

Where we start out with understanding and knowing what God has done and is doing in our lives has a lot to do with where we end up brothers and sisters...

A believer who starts out with the understanding of what God has done; is not proud, they avoid self-righteousness, they are not self-centered, they find it easier and more natural to extend grace and mercy and forgiveness to others.

They do not have a consumer mentality when it comes to their church, they understand that they have been spiritually connected to the other church members; they are able to serve others, they are able to let others serve them, they realize that the church is something unique and it's not like other institutions in our society where we can choose to associate or leave as we please and that it will outlast everything else and continue to exist in the New Creation.

But a believer who starts out with the misunderstanding that their experience with Jesus, their faith and beliefs, and their association with the church are their own private matters and the result of their personal decisions ends up in the exact opposite place...

And if they have never had the benefit of being instructed by the Apostle Paul's letter to give them the proper understanding of what they have experienced – they may very well slip into trusting and hoping in themselves and their own efforts.

And as Christian as those efforts may look – they are not truly trusting and hoping in Jesus Christ because they don't realize what Paul is teaching us here – that God is doing all of this to us IN Christ.

So brothers and sisters as we start a new year, as we start this study of the letter of Ephesians, let us make sure that where we are starting from lines up with what our Apostle Paul teaches us at the start of this letter...

Because where we start out – has a lot to do with where we end up.

Look at what God has done, and look for what God is doing!
Amen