

Look what GOD has done!
Ephesians 1

Well brothers and sisters, we are now a month into the New Year, so I am going to begin my message this morning that many pastors across North America are probably asking their congregation today... and that is *“How are your New Year’s resolutions going?”*

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... or giving some practical advice and

encouragement to stick to our resolutions and keep going with them. I know this because I have done these kinds of messages at the start of a new year many times.

But something I don’t often do with regards to New Year’s resolutions is ask *“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 how is that going?”*

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 the question that has emerged from my studying the first chapter of the book of Ephesians and listening to what God is saying in it.

And that’s the first lesson this morning Brothers and sisters. When we 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, as we are starting this New Year, for the month of Feb and March we will be working our way through the book of Ephesians, all six chapters of it. 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... and its why I'm having a hard time keeping them!"

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 The contents don't indicate that it wasn't written to a specific church that was dealing with a specific problem

to which Paul was offering a specific solution and instruction.

So Paul wrote this letter, we call Ephesians, as sort of a Christianity 101 or Christian Doctrine and Living for Dummies -

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.

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 the copy that was sent to the church in Ephesus it in New Testament, it IS intended for us as well, God's Holy People here in Valleyview.

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. It's 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 just before the end of March.

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, pull out your bibles, or bible apps and please turn with me to Ephesians 1 and follow along with the text as we dig into the first chapter in 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 –as I mentioned this book of scripture happened to be 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 *"I hope this letter finds you 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 together at worship, Paul offers a lengthy

doxology of praise to fit into a worship service 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 – very appropriate for worship – Paul continues his liturgical accommodation in composing this letter and includes 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 our 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 us to be able to do. He writes that he 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.7-18)

So as God answers Paul's prayer in this letter, we will begin to understand and this scripture will change our questions and bring up other issues that we hadn't thought about before and put them before us and say *"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.

Now the key to understanding it, the thread which weaves the whole first chapter together, is to ask the question "what God is doing and what has God 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: ²Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³Praise 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. ⁴For he chose us in him before the creation of

the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption to son-ship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment— to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. ¹¹In 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, ¹²in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³And 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 ¹⁸I 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, ¹⁹and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹far 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. ²²And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,

I don't know about you – but when I go through this chapter highlight what God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are doing – somehow and it all comes together and i understand it better.

And its 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 resolutions are?”* Given all that God has done, what is He going to do this year?

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.

But once we understand that it is God doing these things... we start to realize 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 our understanding of experiencing of what God is doing, of what God's resolutions are for us 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.*” That’s God’s resolution!

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 worshiping 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, and that this is what God has resolved for you, for us in this coming year.

It is God working and doing things in our lives and in this world which has resulted in what we have experienced and Paul gives us the proper terms to identify and 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 gave you the Spirit of Revelation.

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 gave you the Spirit of Wisdom.

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's God opening the eyes of your heart!

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? God predestined you.

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.

As Paul says in vs. 4, a summary description of this plan, of God's resolutions for us, that God *"chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight"*

So this isn't actually something that God has just recently come up with, it 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 – when 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. As Paul says in vs. 12-13, God’s actions result in our putting hope in Jesus, in believing the gospel message, and as God answers Paul’s prayer in this chapter it results 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.

So, 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 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, but 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...

If they have not benefited 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, it's self-righteousness and that won't endure God's judgement. Only that which God has done for us will carry us through His judgement – in Christ as His Body.

So brothers and sisters as we start a new year, as we start this study of the letter of Ephesians, as we learn what the Church is, let us make sure we start with what OUR Apostle 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