

Preaching at its best invites people to see something the preacher has seen. I get so excited, and I want you to see it too. I'll never be the same. I don't want to be the same. You'll never be the same. You won't want to be the same.

Today, come with me up a high mountain, and let me show you a breath-taking vista. This perspective will put many things into perspective. It will also prepare us to join in the doxology that brings the first half of Ephesians to a close.

### **The Meaning of Christ**

God made the decision to create a worldwide community He could call His people. He made that decision before He created the world, and love prompted Him to make it. Jesus Christ carried out His decision by emancipating His followers from guilt and lies and estrangement from God and constituting them as God's chosen people, the Church. As a result, God began to unveil **the mystery of his will**, which is **to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ**. Those are some of our spiritual blessings in Christ, and they make the Church more than a match for the spiritual forces of evil that make war against the Church and all human flourishing.

Paul knew his teaching baffled the Ephesians, who were new converts to Christianity. He also knew that only God could give the help they needed. So, he prayed for them to know God better by knowing the hope God called them to, the riches of God's people, the Church, and the power of God at work on behalf of the Church.

On behalf of the Church and of all creation **God placed all things under his feet** (under Christ's feet). Christ rose from the dead and is authorized to exercise God's power anywhere on earth in any way that His love and justice deem wise. And the Church is to embody the full meaning of Christ for human life.

### **The Meaning of the Church**

Ephesians 1 is a magnificent summary of the meaning of Christ. But Paul didn't stop there. If he had, then hardheaded realists in the congregation would accuse him of having his head in the clouds and being out of touch with reality. Ephesians 2 is as real as it gets. It opens with a watershed article of belief about human nature: **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. Dead** is the crucial word. To be **separate from, excluded from, foreigners to, and without** God and His purpose is spiritual death. That is humanity's natural state.

God had to create His chosen people out of people who were **dead in transgressions and sins**. That's why God's love prompted Him to mount a costly rescue operation. Jesus carried out that operation by His death on the cross. The biblical name for this costly act of God's kindness for people who don't deserve it is grace.

We respond to God's grace and receive spiritual life by faith. We believe in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, we say publicly, "Jesus is Lord," and we are baptized into His name. Faith unites us with Christ, joins us to the people of God in covenant with God, and gives us an enduring hope. We are alive. The Bible calls the entire process – from God's decision before the world began to the death of Christ to the most recent baptism and forward to the New Jerusalem – salvation. Jesus Christ has saved us from spiritual death.

But that is just the starting point. Christ brings these resurrected ragamuffins together as God's chosen people, the Church, with a clear purpose in mind. His purpose became clear thanks to an age-old conflict between Jews and non-Jews, whom we call Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles were oil and water; they were apples and oranges. Many Gentiles despised Jews, and Jews returned the favor. The apostle said that Christ brought them together. They couldn't agree on the time of day, but they agreed on Christ.

As a result, something unprecedented began to happen in synagogues and house churches of the Roman Empire. Little bands of Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus were meeting together to worship Him. It wasn't easy. They often disagreed. They disagreed about how believers should spend their time on the Sabbath. They disagreed on what food Jesus people should eat. They disagreed about where they should buy their meat. They disagreed and could be disagreeable, but they worshipped together and tried to get along. The unthinkable was happening.

The wisdom of God began to emerge. There was not to be a Jewish Church and a Gentile Church. There was to be one Church, one body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:13) There is not to be a Black Church and a White Church and a Chinese Church, etc. Those labels may be convenient shorthand for the ethnic make up of congregations, but if we aren't careful, and we have not been careful, convenience may kill the optic nerve of our spiritual sight, so that we can no longer see that red and yellow, black and white, we Christians are all **members together of one body**. There is only one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

**The rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms** see this Church and tremble. **The heavenly realms** are not heaven. They are where the conflict between good and evil takes place. They are where the spiritual forces of evil fragment, betray, and kill human life; but they tremble, when the Church makes known the wisdom of God, which reunites, befriends, and gives life to the human family in Christ. The Church is the sign that they have met their match, and their days are numbered.

**In him** (in Christ) **the whole Church is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord**. From the day Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, He has been the Architect, who designs and oversees the building of God's chosen people, the Church. He is building a temple, and we are that temple.

And here's the wonder: **In him** (in Christ) the whole Church is **being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit**. The Church is God's home away from home. It is His dwelling place on earth. "Salvation is of the *Church* because the flesh of the *Church* is the abode of the divine presence in the world. It is the carnal anchor that God has sunk into the soil of creation." (Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 256) That is the Church's calling: to be the flesh in which God lives in this world.

How could Paul make the Ephesians see that? Actually, he could not. Only God can do that. So, Paul prayed for them again, and what a prayer! But he did not pray for them to love Christ more. That is not my prayer for you. It should not be our prayer for each other. There is something more important than our love for Christ.

What we need more than our next breath is to know that Christ loves us. I hope it doesn't disappoint you for me to say that. Perhaps you expect me to say so much more. Perhaps you think there is more. But there is no more. If we ever know in our bones what it

means that Christ loves us, we shall know there is no more.

The prayer of Ephesians 3 is a prayer for inner strength to experience the love God has for us. The inner strength comes when Christ moves in, makes Himself comfortable in our lives, has the run of the house, and makes necessary changes to the house and to the habits of the house. The knowledge that God loves us is the secret to how the Church embodies the full meaning of God for human life. Ephesians 2-3 are a magnificent summary of the meaning of the Church.

### **The Doxology**

I started this sermon by asking you to come with me up a high mountain, and let me show you a breath-taking vista. With that vista now perched in your soul like a bird from Noah's ark that just found a tree branch, I'd like to mess with your head for a few minutes. No tricks! Nothing embarrassing! Properly understood, Ephesians allows, in fact, Ephesians encourages us to see our breath-taking vista from both ends.

Remember, Ephesians 1:4 placed us, if you will, in eternity past, before the creation of the world. It says: God **chose us in him** (in Christ) **before the creation of the world**. It's as if Paul said, "Come, stand with the Creator of all things – blessed be His name! – when the Church was only a gleam in the eye of God. Stand with Him and feel His love decide to create a people on earth He would call His people. Stand with Him and watch the universe materialize, and watch as Man and his checkered history emerge on the earth. Watch as God chooses Abraham out of the whole motley crew, as you might choose a shirt to wear, and begins His chosen people.

But Ephesians also summons us to stand on this end of the breath-taking vista we have looked at together. Watch as Abraham and his descendants come toward us out of the darkness of the past with their incomparable poets and prophets. Watch one of Abraham's descendants step out of obscurity and stun a nation and challenge kings and Emperor and dies and rises again. Watch His followers writhe under the strain of admitting Gentiles to their number without requiring them to honor Jewish traditions. Watch the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church emerge and push itself across the centuries and across the globe until today two people out of seven on the planet call themselves followers of Jesus Christ.

Stand and wonder! Watch and wonder! And say with the apostle: **Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to the power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.**

### **Take-away**

Now, we have to pack our gear and descend the mountain where we have seen the wisdom of God unfolding itself to our faith. We have to descend once again to our home in the low places where often we cannot see the forest for the trees. Life is so immediate, so urgent, so imperious at times that the power of God we witnessed on the heights can seem distant and irrelevant. We need to prepare for that, while memories of that eternal vista are still fresh in our minds.

We come back down into a world where the story of Ephesians has no public traction.

People do not try to disprove or discredit the story so much as they just ignore it. We come back down into a world that has systematically dismantled and systematically ignores Christianity's once dominant hold on American culture.

Any talk of "taking America back" in the sense of restoring Christianity's once dominant hold on American culture is unrealistic and irresponsible. The rules of the game have changed. The American conditions under which the Church now lives have changed. They will never again be what they once were.

What has not changed is what we saw from the mountaintop. What has not changed is God's loving, eternal decision to have a worldwide community He can call His people. What has not changed is the mission of Jesus Christ, whose life, death, resurrection, and sovereign power creates and sustains God's chosen people. What hasn't changed is the Church's calling to be the flesh in which God makes His home in creation.

Therefore, the task God lays upon the Church in our generation is to determine how we are to embody God's life under the conditions of the new, American secularism. The second half of Ephesians is indispensable for that.

The Doxology that crowns the first half of Ephesians seeds the second half of Ephesians with the power of God like a John Deere tractor seeds a Kansas cornfield from horizon to horizon. The Doxology calls it **the power that is at work within us**. Ephesians 1:20 told us that it is the same power **which he (God) exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead**. It is the same power by which **God placed all things under his feet** (under Christ's feet).

It is not impossible to embody the life of God under the new conditions under which we now live. The principalities and powers of this world, whatever they can do to us, are no match for the power of God, whose stated goal is **to bring all things** (including the principalities and powers) **in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ**. (Ephesians 1:10)

So, let us trust and obey our sovereign Lord in such a way that once again this praise shall erupt from our lips as the deepest cry of our hearts: **Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to the power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.**