

“Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ” | Ephesians 1:1-2 (Grace & Gratitude: A Study in Ephesians 1-3)

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(Discussion questions on page 7)

Over the next few months, we will turn to the first half of one of Paul’s most majestic letters, Ephesians. A letter which some have called “the crown and climax of Pauline theology.”¹ One writer has said that “Paul has written nothing more profound than chapters 1 to 3 of Ephesians.”² The great mid-century preacher, Martin Lloyd-Jones (who gave 233 sermons on Ephesians), said of the letter: “If the Epistle to the Romans is the purest expression of the gospel, the Epistle to the Ephesians is the sublimest and the most majestic expression of it.”³

The letter breaks into two parts. Chapters 1-3 set forth doctrine and chapters 4-6 respond with application for Christian life. We will spend the next months climbing into the heights of the first chapters. Phrases and concepts are lofty, at times dizzying: “the heavenly places,” “God works all things according to the counsel of his will,” “that you may be filled with all the fulness of God,” “you are being built together into a dwelling place for God.” And over and over the refrain sounds, all this is “to the praise of his glory.” We must pray that through this letter God awakens us to the grandeur of His glory and grace.

As we walk up to this mountain today, we are met at the trailhead with these opening words: “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God” (Eph 1:1). Before we venture any further, we will take time today to ask who this man Paul is, and why he introduces himself as an apostle, and what exactly he’s aiming at with this letter. So, (1) Paul’s Bio, (2) Paul’s Authority, (3) Paul’s Aim.

I. Paul’s Bio

From his letters and the writing of his travel companion, Luke, we can make a light sketch of Paul’s story.

Tarsus: My favorite part of biographies is often the early years—we can only say a few things about Paul’s: “I am a Jew, from **Tarsus** in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city” (Acts 21:39), Paul says during a speech recorded in Acts. Located in what is now southeast Turkey, just a few miles inland from the Mediterranean, Tarsus was already old when Paul was born, and well respected. It was second only to Athens as a hub for philosophers, and its location near trade routes helped its thriving textile industry, which produced fabrics used for tent making.

¹ Lloyd Jones, Ephesians, volume one chapter one.

² Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament: The Epistles of Paul, Volume IV* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1931), 515.

³ Martin Lloyd Jones, *God’s Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians 1:1 to 23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 12.

Tentmaking: It's likely Paul learned the trade of tentmaking growing up—possibly from his own family⁴—, and it's clear this was how he supported himself as he traveled and ministered. Paul writes of “working with his own hands” (1 Cor 4:12) at times, stressing this kept him from becoming dependent on his churches.

Torah: Despite growing up away from Israel, Paul was raised in a devout Jewish family. In his words, he was “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee” (Phil 3:5). Perhaps his Hebrew name, Saul, came from his association with the tribe of Benjamin, as Israel's first king, Saul, was a Benjaminite.

Tenacity and Teaching: Perhaps most importantly, Paul was trained to be a Pharisee, a group within Judaism that took observing the Scripture very seriously, and believed Israel's biggest problem was in the many who were too lax. And Paul wasn't just a Pharisee—he was an exceptionally well-trained and zealous one. He moved to Jerusalem when he was young to train under the famed Rabbi, Gamaliel, as he reminds a group of Jews he's in an altercation with in Jerusalem: though “born in Tarsus in Cilicia,” I “but brought up in this city [=Jerusalem], educated at the feet of **Gamaliel** according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God... (Acts 22:3).

His zeal carried him so far as seeing the early Jesus movement as a pollutant, and therefore he persecuted it, as he explains:

you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so *extremely zealous* was I for the traditions of my fathers. (Gal 1:13-14).⁵

This all brings us to the part of Paul's bio about his conversion—which is encapsulated in the powerful phrase in his greeting, “by the will of God.”

Paul says he is “an apostle of Jesus Christ, *by the Will of God*.” God broke into Paul's life. The story is recounted several times; Luke recounts it in Acts 9:

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” ⁵ And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am

⁴ All we read of his larger family is a comment in Acts 23 when “the son of Paul's sister,” we read, comes to the aid of Paul while Paul is imprisoned (Acts 23:16).

⁵ He says the same in Philippians 3, “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil 3:5-6).

Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” (Acts 9:1-6)

This became the fulcrum of Paul’s life, as he says to the Galatians:

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me (Gal 1:15-16).

There are two things to draw out from Paul’s conversion about the Christian life in general.

1. God uses aspects of our pre-conversion past

Sometimes we imagine that when we turn to serve God, we leave everything else about our lives behind. It is true that we turn away from sin and from idols we once served. But when we consider Paul, we are reminded there is continuity between the pre- and post-conversion self.

Paul was passionate by nature. “Zealous” is the word he uses.

Paul was not a pluralist in the post-modern sense of believing there are many truths. He was more exacting and demanding in how he thought about the world. He was a *monotheist*—he believed in one true God. He believed there was only one true story about the world, and therefore only one true way to live.

Paul was multi-lingual (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek), multi-cultural (Greek, Roman, Jewish), extremely well educated (trained to handle Scripture, especially), and brilliant: Several times he argued before high ranking political figures, and once a governor, Festus—upon listening to Paul—said in a loud voice, “Paul, your great learning (τὰ πολλά σε γράμματα) is driving you out of your mind” (Acts 26:24). When you read Paul’s letters, you get the impression he had swallowed the Bible whole—both in its Hebrew and Greek editions.

As the man building up the church all over the Roman Empire, God leverages Paul’s temperament—that Paul is passionate and zealous is a good and necessary things. And God uses Paul’s upbringing—that Paul is multi-lingual and multi-cultural is crucial for his missionary work between Jews and Greeks and Romans. And Paul’s training as a Pharisee, uniquely prepared him for applying Scriptures to tricky pastoral situations. Even before Paul knew it, God was training Paul to be a missionary for Jesus.

This is true for us, too. If we imagine that God is making with our lives one great meal, then we need to recognize that he can scoop up all the aspects of our lives—even the pre-conversion things—as ingredients. Of course, we must discard sins and false gods, but in your temperament, your experiences and training along the way, you will find—as you look back—that God can use it all for his purposes. Such was the case with the prodigy from Tarsus, who never would have guessed that the same Scriptures he was studying to disprove Jesus as the Christ, were preparing him to serve Jesus as the Christ.

2. We need more than reason; we need revelation.

Second, Paul's conversion reminds us that knowing God requires more than reason and effort: Paul, despite all his thinking and praying, could not come to an accurate picture of Jesus Christ by himself. It had to be *revealed* to him. So too with Peter. When he first declares that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matt 16:16), Jesus responds:

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 16:17).

How a person comes to believe that Jesus is the Son of God—that he is the way, the truth, and the life—may take many forms when looking from the outside. But when a Christian looks back over their life, they say, as did Paul, I am a Christian *by the will of God*. God at some point broke in, opened my eyes.

That is enough on Paul's biography in general. We next need to grapple with what this title means, Paul *an Apostle* of Jesus Christ. Why does Paul want us to know he is an apostle? This takes us to our second major heading—Paul's *Authority*.

II. Paul's Authority

Paul begins nine of his thirteen letters by stating he is an apostle in the first line—here are a few examples:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an **apostle**, set apart for the gospel of God (Rom 1:1)

Paul, called by the will of God to be an **apostle** of Christ Jesus (1 Cor 1:1)

Paul, an **apostle**—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father (Gal 1:1)⁶

When Paul is including a co-worker in his greeting, he is careful not to include them in this title apostle:

Paul, called by the will of God to be an **apostle** of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes (1 Cor 1:1).

Paul, an **apostle** of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, (2 Cor 1:1).⁷

⁶ Other instances: **Eph. 1:1** Paul, an **apostle** of Christ Jesus by the will of God; **Col. 1:1** Paul, an **apostle** of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother; **1Tim. 1:1** Paul, an **apostle** of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope; **2Tim. 1:1** Paul, an **apostle** of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus; **Titus 1:1** Paul, a servant of God and an **apostle** of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness,

⁷ So also, Colossians 1:1, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother."

Paul does not begin these letters with, Paul and Timothy, *apostles* of Jesus Christ. He distances them from that title. Why?

There is something about that title that is unique to a certain group, and this group had unique authority as the church began. Paul will say later in Ephesians that the church is “built on the foundation of the **apostles** and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph 2:20).⁸

What is an apostle, then?

The term comes from a verb that means “to send,” and that verb was used regularly to describe messengers of all types in Paul’s day. But the proper noun, *apostle*, came to signify key leaders Jesus he set apart to represent him. It first appears when he calls the twelve:

And Jesus went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. ¹⁴ And he appointed twelve (whom he also named **apostles**) so that they might be with him and he might **send them out** to preach ¹⁵ and have authority to cast out demons. (Mark 3:13-15).

Jesus sends them out and gives them authority—in this case over demonic powers.

After one of the twelve betrayed Jesus (Judas), the eleven determine to appoint a new apostle to fill Judas’ place. Here is the criteria:

one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection. (Acts 1:21-22).

Being a “witness to Jesus’ resurrection” becomes key for Apostleship—these are men who have *first-hand, eye-witness* knowledge of the risen Lord. This is why Paul’s Damascus Road experience is so important for his calling, and why he emphasizes not merely that he came to believe in Jesus, but that Jesus *appeared* to him:

Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? (1 Cor 9:1).

Not everyone who saw the resurrected Lord was an apostle; but everyone who was an apostle—in this official sense—had seen the risen Lord.

Why does this matter? Why does Paul state this in his letter opening? It matters because in this apostleship lies Paul’s **authority**: his authority to establish churches, appoint leaders there, and ultimately write letters that are Holy Scripture.

⁸ So also, in the book of revelation, the wall of the eternal, heavenly city “has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (Rev 21:14).

God appointed these eyewitnesses as the people he worked through to write the New Testament Scriptures—much like He had worked, by the Holy Spirit, to speak Scripture into being through Moses, David, and the Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Paul, with trembling humility, grasps this authority he has been given. Paul can say things like this to the Corinthians:

If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you *are a command of the Lord*. (1 Cor 14:37)

Paul can speak of his own words as a command of the Lord! That is an amazing claim. And it is because He is an appointed apostle. Later, Peter will refer to Paul's writings on par with the other Scriptures.⁹

A few implications we must draw from Paul's *apostleship* to prepare us for Ephesians:

First, we must hear Paul with the authority of Jesus. When Jesus commissions the apostles, he gives them authority to speak in his name. Some people pick and choose what parts of the Bible they will adhere to. We cannot do that. Paul is an *apostle of Jesus Christ* (Eph 1:1); he speaks for Christ when he speaks.

Second, we must recognize that this letter, Ephesians, as part of the Apostolic writing, is the foundation of our church: we are, as Paul will say later in the letter, “²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph 2:20). As we consider the doctrinal truths in these first three chapters—about God, about Christ, about Salvation, about the Church—we are running our hands along the giant foundation stones of the great cathedral God has built, and is building.

Finally, let's consider the phrase in the greeting of the letter, “To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus,” (1:1), asking what Paul's aim is in writing to these people.

III. Paul's Aim

Overall, Paul's aim is to build up the church by building up his readers, who, though already Christians (saints, faithful in Christ Jesus), seem to have a few needs. I will note three that arise from chapters 1-3, and in doing so try to prepare our hearts for what to seek as we study the letter: Paul's readers need these three things:

(1) **Reminding:** Reminding of their spiritual privileges which they have in Christ (1:3-14; 2:1-22): “Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (1:3).

⁹ “our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other **Scriptures**. (2 Peter 3:15).

(2) **Greater Insight:** Greater insight and further knowledge of all that their salvation entails—particularly of the power of God displayed in Christ’s resurrection which is available to them: “Remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead” (1:16-20).

(3) **Greater Experience:** A more complete experience of the presence of the Spirit and of Christ within them, of the love of Christ and the fulness of the life and presence of God: “Paul prays that God “may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you ... ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (3:14-19).

I pray that God may do all these things for us, too, as we climb into this mountain of a Letter.

Amen.

Small Group Questions

1. Have you ever read Ephesians? If so, do you have any opinions about it? If you have never read it, what are a few things you’re curious about as we start to study it? How might these answers impact how you pray as we prepare to study the letter?
2. We are told who the author of the letter is in the opening, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God.” Paul had a significant conversion experience (as recorded in Acts 9 and elsewhere). Have you had a conversion experience? If so, are there things about your pre-conversion life that God has leveraged/used in how you serve him today?
3. Paul introduces himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ *by the will of God.*” Do you think people can become followers of God and Christ by their own will? Or, do they need the power of God? Read John 3:1-8 for some further insight. If we need God’s power in order to know and follow God, how might this impact how you pray for your loved ones or friends who do not know Christ?
4. Under the last heading of the sermon, “Paul’s Aim,” we list three things he has in mind as he writes in terms of his readers’ needs. Can you turn these into prayers for yourself as we begin to study the letter?