

Gospel – Good News for Strugglers * Ephesians 1:1-8

Will you pray with me? Lord Jesus, thank you; your grace amazes, remind us again, refresh us today! There is nothing in me that can change a heart. I can read a text, say some words, crack a joke, but I am completely unable to change one single soul; but your Holy Spirit can. Your Holy Spirit can heal. It can encourage a struggler; He can cause a heart to suddenly see Jesus as valuable and precious where before there was no desire for Him at all! So please come, Holy Spirit, and move amongst these souls. Some feel like they are hanging by a thread, some are hard, some are stuck in religious checklists, believing that they can somehow work their way to your grace and mercy, and some don't think of you at all. But everyone in this room has failed you this week. So as we open the scriptures, just do what you do God, and allow it to penetrate our hearts. For our joy, and your glory, Amen.

Go ahead and grab a seat. You probably thought I was never going to let you sit down. That would be interesting, right? The whole service standing up. You're like, do you have any idea how long the sermons are here, Hess? People will be passing out! Well, God has blessed us with luxury seating, so we should use it.

I have a lofty goal this morning. My goal is through the words of scripture and the Holy Spirit making it stick, that today you who are believers and followers of Jesus would somehow feel again, or be stunned at the joy of your salvation in a way that maybe you haven't for a while. It shouldn't be so. I swore up and down that it would never happen to me, but the farther in time we get from the day God caused us to be born again, somehow we get used to the miracle that God has done in us. I want you to feel it fresh today, and I want to tell you why.

These past weeks and months have been filled with some of the best preaching and teaching we could possibly ask for, would you agree? But I will tell you, I'm sure some of you will agree, many of them have been hard. Hard to hear, harder yet to actually leave this room and go do. As we've walked through the Gospel of Matthew, we've had to come face to face with our judgmental attitude and our anger. We've had to deal with conflict, conflict at home, in a marriage, at the workplace. It's been hard, because we want to do it our way. We've been confronted by Jesus on our unforgiveness and our pride. And while the teaching has been excellent, when we walk out of this room we can start to wonder if we are ever going to get it! I mean, it's not so much that we don't get the *what*, we know *what* we are supposed to do... we know what we are *not* supposed to do, and with each message we've been clearly shown the *why* from Scripture. We know we are supposed to forgive, and we know why. We know we are supposed to handle our anger, and we know why. But what I would like to try and get closer to today is: where does the "want to" come from? Where does the want to come from? Because there are plenty of times where I know I'm not supposed to feel this way about that person. I know that, I get that. Where does the "want to" come from? Because I keep messing up, I keep failing, and there are times I just say, "What's the deal?"

And I know enough of you in here to say I'm not the only one! We're strugglers. I want God's word to encourage you, struggling Christian. Please look up here for a minute ok. I'm not the smartest guy in the room, but what my little experience tells me is that for a lot of people, our default position as strugglers is to believe that God is disappointed and frustrated, and that He is simply tolerating us.

If we are ever going to get closer to the "want to," you and I need to be reminded of some very big truths and of how God sees us, you and me.

Open your Bibles to Ephesians chapter 1. It's one book to the right of Galatians, it's a small book, so don't jump over it. Ephesians chapter 1, first verse, we're only going through verse 8
¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Before we go any further, look again at who Paul is writing this to. To the saints, believers, Christians, whatever you want to call them, followers of Jesus Christ. Now – I stopped us there for just a second, because do you think the church in Ephesus had any goofballs? Do you think that the church there had any strugglers? You bet they did, and Paul knew it! Every church is full of them, but how does he address them? He calls them saints, then gives them the Gospel! The New Testament is full again and again of Paul or others giving the Gospel to Christians. The Gospel, the good news that Christ died for sinners isn't only for non-believers. We think we need the Gospel until we come to salvation, and then from there on it's up to us to white knuckle it out. Well that is not the pattern we see in the Bible. Over and over we hear: Let me remind you, Christian, of the gospel. Let's keep reading saints, all the way through verse 8.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight.

I know that this is very likely one of the more theologically packed sections of scripture in the New Testament. And there are some weighty topics in here that are covered in whole chapters of Systematic Theology books and some very smart people have given their lives to studying and explaining these topics and when we walk through this passage together I'm not going to ignore them, or ask you to turn off your brain, but at the same time my purpose in sharing this passage with you is so that we would get to verse 6 and fulfill the purpose of His will. Namely that this morning, struggler, you will take heart and praise His glorious grace. But if we are to praise His grace, we have to contemplate and get the words Paul is using, and get them from our head to our heart.

Verse 3, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now I wasn't in the prison cell with Paul when he wrote this, but from what I've studied and read this week, let me offer an

opinion of how I think Paul was feeling in his heart. Or I can for sure at least tell you how he was not feeling when he wrote this. (Monotone) "Blessed be the God and Father or our Lord Jesus Christ." Every indication is that when the apostle Paul wrote this, his heart was burning with passion, "BLESSED BE THE GOD AND FATHER OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST!" He's amazed about what he's about to tell us. He's like, let me tell you why God, the Father of our Lord Jesus is amazing. Then He just takes off, "Who blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." That's a spectacular verse! Every? All of them? Everything in the heavenly places? Are you digging this? I mean, let's make sure we are understanding this correctly. So it's not that he's given me every *material* blessing, because remember Jesus says, no, no, no, don't worry so much about that stuff, moths can eat that stuff, rust can get that stuff. You know this right? Everything you own – everything – is the future stuff of garage sales, junkyards, and dumps. In fact, we're moving so fast right now that that iPhone or whatever phone you have right now, that little thing that you love, will be obsolete before this service will end today! Before you get home today you'll need an upgrade on that thing! So God the Father has blessed us with everything in Christ Jesus. He's talking to you, struggler, we need 100 times more help spiritually than we do with material stuff. And every Spiritual blessing of heaven is yours in Christ! Here's where things start to get crazy awesome, He's going to tell us what some of these blessings are.

Verse 4, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, Now we'll pick this apart in a minute, but let me take you back to something I said a minute ago and apply this verse to it. I said that for a lot of people, our default position as strugglers is to believe that God is disappointed and frustrated and that He is simply tolerating us. The apostle Paul right here says no, no, no, listen to me. Before the foundation of the world was laid, in love, God made up his mind that He was going to adopt you as sons and daughters, and He was going to make you holy and blameless in His sight. How amazing is our God that He chose you when He knew you were going to screw up and fail! How amazing does that make our God that in our hypocrisy, He's long suffering with us! Listen to me Christian struggler, God is not in love with some future version of you! It's not you tomorrow that He loves and delights in. It's not you when you finally get your act together. Listen, from before the foundation of the world, in love, He decided you would be His child. That's love. When from eternity past God looked upon you seeing your faults, seeing your pride and all of your sin, and said, that one right there. I want that one in my family. I will do anything to get that man in my family! I will pay the price with my Sons life! Preach that Gospel to yourself every day before your feet hit the floor – and I promise you will have better days ahead.

Now lets take a minute and talk about verse 4 where it says **Even as he chose us in Him before the foundation of the world** This verse should be a log on the fire of your heart that burns into a blazing fire if you are a struggler, but some people can get hung up on this verse. This verse, and many others simply teach that God is sovereign. God alone gets to be God, and according to his perfect will and good pleasure, He gets to choose whom he will adopt as sons and daughters and make blameless through the incredibly costly blood of His son Jesus Christ. It's this verse and others that give us the doctrine of election – which simply means choosing. I'm not going to stand up here and tell you how God decided to do this, because quite frankly, if

anyone's heart is as wicked as mine, it's mind blowing that He would choose anyone to be saved. I just know that we have some things God revealed about Himself in this book, so we look to it for answers, and some things God chooses not to reveal to us. So let's look at a few verses to see what God *has* revealed to us about this incredibly loving choice He made long long ago.

Paul & Barnabas in Antioch: After preaching the Gospel to a bunch of malcontents and misfits, Gentiles – Acts 13:48 ⁴⁸ And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

Paul's 2nd letter to the Thessalonians 2:13 ¹³ But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

In Romans 8:28-30 ²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew (*or chose*) he also predestined (*or set as his goal or God determined, and God is never thwarted*) to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

2 Timothy 1:8-9 ⁸ Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, ⁹ who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,

My goal is not to drown you with Scripture, so just one more (there are others.) Romans 9:11-13 ¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—¹² she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Look, God is God – He is sovereign. The Bible tells us that we're the lumps of clay and He's the potter. Maybe you do or maybe you don't like it, but either way we don't get to say, "Look here man, why are you doing it this way?" He actually tells us *why* or what His purpose is in doing this in just a few verses. But listen, if God waits for those who will love and adore him, nobody is saved. Scripture is clear. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." Romans 3:12. If God waits for those who might live a perfect life worthy of Him calling us sons and daughters, nobody is saved because nobody will. He knew this about us! And so man or woman in Christ but struggling, God does not regret saving you! He doesn't regret it! He doesn't! You haven't surprised Him. You cannot surprise Him because He chose you, knowing everything you would do – and still He sent His Son. You have no sin, past, present or future that has more power than the cross of Jesus Christ. This means that your salvation wasn't just a past event that tends to fade from your memory, but Jesus Christ is even now continuing to save you! He didn't just forgive your past sins and is now leaving it up to you

to conquer your present and future sins. Which means it doesn't matter how you came in here! It means God can rescue! God can save! It means that for those of us who are in Christ but struggling, you do not disgust him! He saw it all and chose you. "Yeah, but Jeremy, you don't know what I struggle with and how deplorable it is." I know that Jesus would say that He paid the price in full, so what you're saying is nonsense. That is the grace that He lavished upon us in His forgiveness. So it was God's choosing you from eternity past and determining that He would make you holy and blameless in His sight, and adopt you into his family. Preach that Gospel to yourself every morning, struggler, before your feet hit the floor, and better days are ahead, I promise.

But why? Why would God choose you?

Well, let's make sure we are clear on the reasons He didn't choose me, or you for that matter. It's not that he looked into the future and saw that I would respond to His Gospel and so I better get lined up with that. He didn't look down the road and just see that I would turn out to be a semi-decent person on the outside and said, "Huh, I think he's going to make it, so I'll make Him part of the elect." That is ridiculous! For a whole bunch of reasons, but also because that would completely contradict scripture when it says. Look just a few verses ahead in your Bible to Ephesians 2:8-9, but by grace (His mercy alone) you have been saved, through faith (belief that Jesus Christ was my only hope.) And this (this faith) is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. So someday when we stand before the Lord, we can't boast about anything! You will not say, "Hey! I made it to church 3 out of 4 Sundays per month." Even the faith I had to believe was a gift from Him. Listen, He did it in love. It was God from start to finish.

Let's talk about why. Why? What is God up to in all of this? Why choose bozo's, and liars, and strugglers? I'm going to back up to verse 5 so we can hit it running. ⁵he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

Now so far, you've heard from me, and from the Scriptures that God loves you. And it's true, He does, but listen, you hear this a lot in church. In the bigger picture, it's not about you! There's something bigger. God didn't pour out his wrath on His Son – and save you – so that you and him can be "boyz." Look, everywhere you see where God rescues, there is an underlying theme, and the underlying theme is verse 6. God is about God. God is ferociously about His name & His glory in a way that he doesn't feel the need to apologize for it. Again and again He is about the praise of His glory, the praise of His grace. And let me tell you why this is good news for you, struggler, because if God is for the praise of his glorious grace, it means that God is not after your begrudging submission. He's not. I mean if I'm grumbling and complaining as I grunt out the list of do's and don'ts, God gets no glory in that. His grace is not praised in my life when I do that, and it's not praised in anyone else's life around me as they watch me mumble and kick the ground, bellyaching about the list of rules I have to keep. Anyone watching that is going to say, man, that dude is miserable, I don't want anything to do with that!

Just so you don't think I'm making this up, let me give you a few examples from Scripture. Isaiah 43 it says that God created us for his glory. In Isaiah 49 that God called Israel for His glory. In Psalm 106 that God rescued Israel from Egypt for His glory. In Ezekiel 20 God spared Israel in the desert for His glory, God gave Israel victory in Canaan for the Glory of His name. Why did He drive out that people? In fact he tells Israel something we need to remember, He literally comes to Israel and tells them, "I'm not driving them out because you guys are awesome. You are a stiff-necked and rebellious people. I'm driving them out because I'm awesome." In John 7, Jesus sought the glory of His father in all that He did. In Matthew 5 and in 1 Peter 2 we see that Jesus tells us to do good works for the glory of His name. God is for God, and Ephesians 1 tells us clearly this morning that He lavishes His grace upon us so that the whole world will praise His glorious grace.

And since God is for God and not after your begrudging submission, all these commands and teaching we've sat under in the weeks past are meant to lead us into greater life and greater joy, that we'll praise His glorious grace. And He wants to line you and me up with how He designed the universe to work. So when Jesus teaches us about marriage, He isn't trying to bully anyone, He's saying, "Look! I made the thing, I get it! These things I'm telling you, you should try them because this marriage thing, I know how this works because catch this... it was my idea!" He does that with sex, with marriage, money, rest, and work – you name it. It's why David delighted in the law. God's going, "Here's how I designed it to work, and greater life (John 10:10) is found in your obedience to how I wired the universe to work, rather than the way you or I think the universe should work. Because frankly, I'm a moron. I mean, we always think our way is the right way, but tell me this, is anyone a worse enemy to you than you are? Has anyone lied to you, more than you've lied to you? Has anyone broken more promises to you more than you? That's why we can run to God and trust that His ways are for our joy, because He is for Himself and the praise of his glorious grace about everything else! If I could just keep reminding myself of the Gospel and how from before the beginning of time, to the end of my life, God is lavishing His grace upon me with truth and with guidance, so that my joy would be so full, causing me to not even be able to help myself but to praise His glorious grace!

The apostle Paul, this dude got it didn't he? He was unstoppable! Beaten, stoned, imprisoned, left for dead, ship-wrecked 3 times! And one time when he was shipwrecked, he barely makes it to an island and gets bitten by a snake. I mean seriously, at what point are you not going, "Lord! Are you serious? I'm doing your work here!" But you couldn't touch this guy. And the world tried, they were like, "**We'll kill you**"... (Paul) – To die is gain! "**We'll leave you alone**"... (Paul) to live is Christ. "**We'll torture you**"... (Paul) – Well, I don't compare the sufferings of this world to come close to future glory. "**We'll put you in prison**"... (Paul) – Well, give me a hymnal and I'll convert all your guards and we'll have a worship service. How is that possible? It's because Paul was continually reminding himself of the Gospel, and it wasn't his righteousness. He had a foreign righteousness.

I have to start to land this plane. I want to point us all in this text one more time to the cross of Christ, and then I want to talk to 3 groups of people in this room about it. Back to Ephesians chapter 1, let's look at verse 7 & 8 together, ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us,

in all wisdom and insight. Guess what, it's the Gospel, written to the Saints, Saints who struggle, reminding us once again that it is in Jesus we have redemption and the forgiveness of our trespasses. We don't have redemption in our pulling off good days, and redemption doesn't slip through our fingers on our bad days. We have redemption through the perfect sacrifice and the blood of Jesus Christ. The cross is a glaring reminder that none of us were good enough, and none of us ever will be. If we could do it perfectly, there'd be no need for the cross. There'd be no daily need for the riches of His grace, and don't you love this word: lavish! When Paul is talking about forgiveness, he's saying that God's grace in forgiveness is a ridiculous amount, it's lavished. Like it's too much, it's over the top, it's extravagant. God's forgiveness for us in Christ and His grace is like the lifestyles of the rich and famous, it's like you living alone in a 72 room mansion. It's over the top! Preach that Gospel to yourself every morning before your feet hit the floor. If you understand correctly (point to the head) that He chose you, and then you get it in here (the heart) that He lavishes His grace upon you, if we get that right, we will not have our feet hit the floor each day and desire to run to sin. Our "want to" will start lining up with "what to" and our lives will point to and praise His glorious grace which is what God is all about in saving you.

I hope that you've felt it fresh today. I hope that it's an encouragement to you tomorrow. But let me just close with a brief word to the three groups of people that generally fill the seats of this church, or any church really.

Man or woman in Christ who is struggling, listen. He has not abandoned you in this difficult season, whether good days, or bad days, He is at work. His Gospel promises, and He has ordained that you will be holy and blameless in His sight! Romans 8:1 tells to us who struggle that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, none. That same book goes on to tell us, "Who will even bring a charge against you?" Don't give up, keep pressing in, keep confessing, keep preaching the Gospel to yourself. He will not let you go!

Maybe you are in here today and you're a church person, but not a Jesus person. I feel really sad for you, because I was stuck there for years. It's miserable game! It's like being engaged, but never getting married, it's horrible. Listen, don't play the religious game, Jesus knows. You know there's no such thing as secrets right? You don't think Jesus sees what you do and what you think when nobody's around? Don't you think God sees what's happening in your life when your not here at church raising your hands and taking notes because that's just what we do in religion. Do you think He just doesn't see that well? Do you think that God just kind of looks down whenever we gather on Sunday, "Looks like everyone's here & doing great!" God wants to set you free from all that stuff. You will never, ever earn it and you will not fool Him! You will be a slave to trying to convince everyone that you've got it together, and the whole time you'll be miserable because deep down you know that the only one who's judgment of you matters see's everything about you. Stop the jumping through hoops and just surrender. He sees everything. And since he sees everything, shouldn't we just confess and come clean and run to Him?

And maybe you are in here today, I don't know, maybe your friend tricked you into coming here – told you they were going to Perkins for breakfast, and you get out of the car and you're like,

this ain't Perkins! And you aren't into church, and you certainly aren't into Jesus. And maybe you think, listen bald guy, you don't know me. You have no idea the life I've lived, the things that people have done to me, you don't know the junk that is my life. There is no way that Jesus would lay down his life for this mess of a person. Let me use the example of the man who under the guidance of the Holy Spirit wrote the text we studied today ok? Hands up in here if you have ever beaten, thrown in jail, and murdered people for following Jesus Christ and sharing the Gospel. Go ahead, it's free time, let's see those hands. Nobody? Well, that was Saul, who later became Paul and wrote 70% of the New Testament. This is a man who was such an enemy of God that he would later say that his whole salvation was to show you that you haven't gone too far! That's what he writes to Timothy, "God saved me, the chief of sinners, so that in the coming age, in the future, men and women would know just how patient and loving God is!" There is no sin in your life that has more power than the cross of Jesus Christ.

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