



By Grace Alone

Ephesians 1:1-14

So here we are at the start of a new chapter in the history of Maidstone Road Baptist Church. A new Minister, new expectations, new possibilities, new way of looking at things? Maybe. In my first few weeks here, I want to explore some foundational things which are essential if we desire to grow as a church. I believe they are the foundations of spiritual growth in the church as well as numerical growth. If you are an old hand, you may think they are obvious. “Why is he telling us about this? We know it already. We’re mature Christians. It’s familiar stuff”.

There is an old saying: *familiarity breeds contempt*. We get so familiar and comfortable with someone or something, that we cease to see the value in it or them, don’t we? It’s particularly true in relationships. Sometimes we take our nearest and dearest for granted. Children and parents. Husbands and wives. We get so used to them that we fail to appreciate them. It can be the same with our faith. We are so familiar with it, that we forget how good it is.

As a Christian, one of the most valuable things I find I need to do from time to time is remember where I came from and why I am where I am. And it isn’t by my merit and my skills, or because of my magnetic personality, or the great deeds I’ve done. It’s because of Jesus. What Jesus has done is the greatest thing that has ever happened on this planet – by a long chalk. But sometimes we can feel and sound less than enthusiastic, can’t we.

I remember that many years ago my father was challenged after a visit from the Jehovah’s Witnesses. They came up with their usual junk but gave Dad opportunity to explain what a Christian was, and how to become one. The Jehovah’s Witness said “if that were true, then I wouldn’t be standing here, but I’d be shouting it from the housetops.” He had a point, even though he didn’t believe what he’d been told, because he could see how radically different the Christian faith is. It’s world beating. Life changing. Society changing.

But how far off we see that faith as applying to me, to my family, my neighbourhood, my town?

Take a look at this picture. It’s a picture of the earthing rod for the electrics in St Kilda. It’s essential if the electrics are to be safe in the Manse. If something is faulty, then the electricity goes to earth rather than making me fried bread. If we want to be growing Christians and want to be a growing church, then we must be earthed in those things which are at the foundation of our faith and make sure that the connection stays healthy. And that’s where some of the early sermons I’m going to preach here at Maidstone Road are going to be going.

In fact, the Christian year is based around making sure we remain grounded in the truths of our faith. We are in a season called Advent. It isn’t Christmas. Christmas starts on 25th December and ends on 6th January and celebrates Jesus’ birth. Of course, the shops think Christmas starts in October and ends with the winter sales. In Woolworth’s they unbelievably started in early September!

But Advent is a preparation for celebrating Jesus’ birthday by focusing on who He IS. It’s designed to remind us where the focus of Christmas – and for that matter the whole of the Christian faith – actually is. At Advent time we remember that God the Son left the glory that was his to become a human being. Why? If you are a Christian this morning you shouldn’t have any problem answering that one – because we know that it is through the Son’s becoming human, being born, living, dying on the cross, being raised to life, that the way has been opened for us to know God and to have eternal life.

And Advent reminds us that the Son becoming a human being – the incarnation – was not a task that God did lightly. The Incarnation was an amazing event in history and that is why in the past the church gave it four weeks in the calendar. It was something to meditate upon, be amazed by and something to give God glory for because it was the start of a process that brought us life. It's the missing ingredient out of seasonal celebrations in our generation – and out of Christmas.

We understand how profound the incarnation is when we realise WHY God did it and WHAT His purposes were for those He was intending to save. So why should God go to such an effort to rescue us? Was it our intrinsic worth? I'll tell you what you're worth. What you're made up of can be bought at a hardware store for a couple of quid and the rest comes out of your tap for a couple pence on your water rates. Was it our value as human beings? No. Quite the reverse.

Here's a familiar verse. It's a good one to memorize. *“For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23*

For all have sinned and come short of God's glory. There is nothing in us that would give us any merit to have a relationship with God, now or at any other time. That's the message of the Bible. If you're not a believer this morning, you don't have a relationship with God. You know that and I know you know that. And you know what? We all are naturally in the same position, so don't feel persecuted by that.

And the amazing truth of this season is that even though we have and can never have a relationship with God, God wanted to have a relationship with us. And that relationship is a love relationship. As a Creator, as our Creator parent, He desired to rescue us and give that opportunity to know Him eternally.

Now in virtually all religions and in general human perception, if you want to have some kind of relationship with God or whoever, it has to be achieved through some form of merit – regular worship, keeping a moral code and not displeasing the god by calling your teddy after one of his favourite prophets.

The Christian faith is simple. It's so simple that even some Christians have problems getting their heads around it. Here it is:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.

The amazing thing about eternal life and relationship to God, is that God doesn't expect us to earn it, or deserve it because we can't live up to His high standards – so He found a way of offering it to us. *It is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*

If you are colour blind, you probably have no idea of what the oval of colour behind my graphics this morning is. Let me show you. It makes up the word Grace. Grace is one of the key ideas behind, not just the Christian faith, but the whole Bible. It's a golden thread that you'll find all the way through the main themes of the Old and New Testaments. It's the way God operates. It is by grace that you have been saved.

What is grace? That's really simple. It's unmerited favour. That's simply all it means. I remember a couple of years back we went to Spring Harvest where the theme was Grace Academy. Sounds good but no-one defined it the whole week long. It seemed to have a mystique about it. You'll often find that with important words in Christian circles. They gain mystique. There's no mystique in grace – it's unmerited favour. It is by the unmerited favour of God that you have been saved. You didn't earn it, you didn't deserve it – you got it as a gift from God which you received through faith.

I love the first chapter of Ephesians and I'm going to introduce it this week and say more about it next week. I'll jump the summary slide and cut to the chase because what it says about grace is stunning. It shows how amazing God's grace is.

If we'd just been saved and that is that then that would have been cool: more than we deserve. But God does so much more:

3 Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! For in our union with Christ he has

blessed us by giving us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly world.

When we became believers God piled the blessings on us. If you are above a certain age you will remember watching Crackerjack! on TV. One thing they did each week was have a quiz. If they got a right answer, they were given a prize and if they got the wrong one they got a cabbage. By the end of the quiz, the children were piled high with gifts – more than they could see and could barely carry. God has piled us up with gifts – and no cabbages! Why? Because He is gracious. We don't deserve it but because God is gracious, we get His blessing.

But don't we have to do something – yes. We have to accept the gift. What's interesting is the balance of this chapter. Paul goes through 13 verses of how much God has done for us before he says - *13 And you also became God's people when you heard the true message, the Good News that brought you salvation.*

Paul gives us four specific blessings in this chapter – here they are.

So we are

- chosen to be holy and without fault
- we have been made His children
- sins forgiven/freed
- made known His eternal purposes to us.

● Chosen to be holy and without fault

4 Even before the world was made, God had already chosen us to be his through our union with Christ, so that we would be holy and without fault before him.

God has chosen us – you're individual, you're special. All that Paul suggests here is that God's grace is not an afterthought. He planned to make us fit to be before Him through Christ – holy and blameless.

● We have been made His children

Because of his love 5 God had already decided that through Jesus Christ he would make us his children--this was his pleasure and purpose.

God has given us a place of honour. He has made us His children. I remember a few years ago I got to know a young black guy called Jannai. He was a real tearaway when he was a teenager – well known to the police. He was a well known scoundrel in his neighbourhood. But he came to know Christ and was changed. One of the things that impressed him was that God had adopted him. "Hey, that means I'm a prince!" And he proudly walked the streets. You are a child of God – special. Don't let anyone put you down. God has made you special in Christ. Don't let the world devalue your faith – it's the other way around!

● Sins forgiven/freed

6 Let us praise God for his glorious grace, for the free gift he gave us in his dear Son! 7 For by the blood of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven. How great is the grace of God, 8 which he gave to us in such large measure!

This brings us full circle to where I started earlier. God's gracious gift to us is His Son. Because God loves us and wants to place favour on us without merit, meant that Jesus had to die for us. The cost was placed on God's account by the shedding of Jesus' blood. Through it our sins are dealt with. Forgiven. God's grace is so great that our sin is dealt with completely.

● Made known His eternal purposes to us.

In all his wisdom and insight 9 God did what he had purposed, and made known to us the secret plan he had already decided to complete by means of Christ.

And finally God has by His grace revealed what other translations call “the mysteries of His will”. God has decided in His grace to share His mind with us.

What I find so amazing about this passage is the way in which I am spacial to God even though I don’t deserve to be, yet in His love, God shows His grace to me, not just a bit but by pouring out His blessings on me. The same is true for every one who has trusted Christ. And the greatest expression of that grace was that God gave up His own dear Son to die for us so that we could be offered that free gift of knowing God and of eternal life.

What a great God we have!

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