

God's plan for the world is to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. He is bringing about a cosmic redemption, undoing the division and destruction that has torn the world apart ever since sin ruined everything.

Everything that sin has shattered and broken – our relationship to God, to each other as human beings, husbands and wives, parents and children, employer-employee, and to the world; animosities that exist in the natural world between ethnicities and nations, genders and generations, as well as warfare with the supernatural world – cosmic powers and spiritual forces; and even internal divisions that exist in our own hearts and heads and hands, so that we love the wrongs things, think the wrong things, and do wrong things – all of this is going to be put right! That's God's plan, and Jesus is the key. *Jesus* is how everything gets put back together, back in order, how a divided world is united once again.

That's why Paul introduces himself as *an apostle of Jesus Christ*. Representing, serving, proclaiming, praising, worshiping Jesus is what Paul's ministry is all about, and so he writes to Ephesus not as a Roman citizen, a Jewish legal scholar, a politician with a plan to save the world, or as an educator, social reformer, or "thinkfluencer". He's an apostle; a commissioned representative of Jesus Christ, the one in whom God is uniting all things in heaven and on earth.

As an *apostle*, Paul is using the letter to the Ephesians to communicate *God's* message and *God's* plan to God's people. These aren't his ideas or opinions; he didn't volunteer as an apostle, and he didn't win a vote to become one. He became an apostle by God's will, not his own. In fact, by his own will, he was the very *opposite* of an apostle, persecuting the Church as an *enemy* of Jesus.

And so his own life is an example of God's unifying and reconciling work: Paul and Jesus were *divided*, until Jesus acts to bring about unity, which we read about in Acts 9 a few minutes ago: unification by way of salvation. Paul's repentance and faith erase the dividing wall between Paul and Jesus, because that's how Paul gains access to in the redemption through Jesus' blood that brings forgiveness.

And having been united to Jesus and made an apostle, Paul writes to the saints in Ephesus, that is, those in Ephesus who, like Paul, believe in Christ Jesus. Though they are of a different race and live in a different place, Paul is connected (united) to the Ephesians through a shared faith. These are people who already agree with Paul that Jesus is at the heart of God's plan, so Paul isn't writing to inform them or convince them that Jesus is King (which is one of the big differences between the gospels and the epistles); he's writing to make it plain to them what Jesus is doing to bring about this reunification and reconciliation of the world.

Because it turns out that while Jesus is at the heart of the plan, believing in Jesus unites you to Him in such a way that you become part of the plan, too, as a member of His church. That's where the unifying work of Christ takes place in the world: in and through the church. Christ is the head, and the church is His body, as we will see at the end of chapter 1.

Ephesians is all about Christ and His Church, which is why you need to be mindful of the fact that the little word "you" throughout the book is not singular, but plural. This book isn't addressed to you as individuals, but to y'all as the church, individuals who have been gathered into one body. That's one of the main unifying acts that Jesus does – He takes individuals from all times, places, social conditions, races, and backgrounds, and makes them one. And so Christ speaks through His apostle to His Church, and you will avoid a lot of misunderstanding and mischief if you remember to think of yourself not primarily as a Christian who is part of a Church, but as a Church member who is a Christian.

The whole point of Christ's unifying work is to create one new man, one body, and so if you aren't a part of that body, then you don't have the redemption or the inheritance that chapter 1 talks about, the new life and peace in chapter 2, the riches and access of chapter 3, the gifts of chapter 4, the love and light found in chapter 5, and the spiritual armor of chapter 6, because all of that belongs not to individuals, but to Christ the head and His body the Church.

This is why people who turn away from the Church, or "organized religion", or whatever they call it, and go and do their own thing, this is why they so quickly fall prey to sinful behaviors, foolish practices, and false doctrines. They don't find health and life and peace and joy, because those things are gifts that Christ gives to His Church!

And so Ephesians highlights for us the fact that God is centering His work of renewing the world in the Church. That's where it happens, that's where the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places look to see God's wisdom on display: not to individual hearts (although individual hearts are of course affected) but to the Church. God's eternal purposes for the world in Christ Jesus are realized in the Church.

And so the more you hear God speak through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the more you will come to love Christ the redeemer, because it's *in Him* you are saved and filled with the fullness of God (that's in ch. 3), and the more you will be *built up in that love* as part of Christ's body, the Church (that's in ch. 4), God's means of spreading salvation and reconciliation all throughout the cosmos. Ephesians is all about unifying all things in Christ.

And while v. 2 is something of a customary greeting of Paul's, it serves in many ways as a summary statement of the message of the whole letter: Because of Christ's redeeming, unifying work, God speaks to the Ephesians, who were once separated from Christ, alienated from Israel, strangers to the covenant, without hope and without God in the world, *now*, when God speaks to the Ephesians, this is the message: grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The Jewish Pharisee shares one God and Father and one Lord with Gentiles in Ephesus. God looks with favor on you, and He is not angry with you, because you believe in Jesus.

The rest of the letter unpacks how that's possible in chapters 1-3, and what it means for how to live in chapters 4-6. This is how Paul usually structures his letters, packing the first half with doctrine and truth; with indicative statements of what God in Christ has done, and the second half with life applications of those truths; with your faith-filled response to God. The first three chapters are "Grace and peace to you in Christ. God gave you this gift; Jesus did this for you", and the last three are "Therefore, walk in a manner worthy of the grace you've been given. God loves you, so walk in love. God has united you to Christ, therefore walk in unity."

And it's critical to get the order right, and to see the connection. If the order was reversed, and instructions for obedience came before the announcement of God's favor, we would think (which we already tend to do!) that God's favor is the result of our obedience. God likes us if and only if we obey; then He rewards us with blessings from Jesus.

But the good news that Paul begins with is that God has already shown His grace and favor towards us in Christ, while we were still dead in our sins! Grace is not the reward of obedience; obedience is how grateful faith responds to grace and peace! Ephesians 2:8-10 is rightfully famous for teaching this in a beautiful way: you are saved by grace, not works, but you are saved *for* works. And so the very structure of the letter teaches us that grace comes first, and then the call to obedience.

That's the order, but we also need to see the *connection*, which Paul hammers home by constantly using the word *therefore*. God's grace and peace in Christ is the central reason, the cause, the motivation for our obedience! This will become clearer in chapter 2, but because we're dead in sin, we can't live obedient lives *until we're alive*, and the grace of God is what brings us to life, *and also* what sustains and empowers our life. We don't start with a quick boost of grace, and then take over and do it ourselves from there. It's grace from first to last; grace not only comes before obedience, grace *produces* obedience.

And so, as one pastor puts it, it's not enough to obey; we must *therefore* obey. It's not enough to walk in unity; we must *therefore* walk in unity. If God's grace is not motivating our obedience and unity, then we're not really obeying, and we're not really joined to Jesus; we just happen to be walking in the same direction for a few steps. It won't last!

But a life of love, unity, and good works that is built on the foundation of the grace and peace that God offers in Jesus Christ *grows* and *matures* and is *built up* and *strengthened* so that it *lasts*, it *endures*. It's not tossed on the waves or blown by the wind; it's not torn to pieces by division and strife. When God gives you His grace and Christ Himself is your peace, then you are built up in love, and filled with all the fullness of God, until you reach maturity and receive the riches of the glorious inheritance you've been promised in Christ: a world made new, united in love by Jesus, so that God might be glorified in the Church and in Christ Jesus, now and forever.

This is God's eternal plan that Paul wrote about to the Ephesians, and it's coming true for you, for this church in Annapolis, for the whole Church around the world and throughout history, because God blesses His Church with grace and peace through Jesus Christ.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*