

Sermon – 06/01/2008 am

Greetings and Signature

Study Text: Ephesians 1:1–12

The New Testament begins with four gospels and then we come to many shorter books called letters or epistles. They are called letters because of their text type. When I write a letter, which I sometimes do, I write ‘dear so and so’ and then sign off with ‘yours truly Dennis’. When the Greeks wrote letters they started with the signature. They would write ‘From Dennis to so and so’ – a bit like you see in faxes and emails. So when the apostle Paul wrote a letter he began in the manner we see in this letter to the Ephesians – ‘Paul an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the saints’.

Indian Christians often add a greeting to their letters. They would write ‘Dear Dennis, greetings in the Lord Jesus Christ’. I try to do the same when I write to brothers in India, and sometimes to people here. Paul often wrote *grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* (1:3 – and most of his letters). We will come back to this greeting in a while.

Today is the first Lord’s Day of the New Year. We are turning to the book of Ephesians; one of the most majestic books of the New Testament. Paul portrays Jesus Christ in an exalted manner as our personal saviour and as head of the church. He portrays God the Father as the one behind the great plan of salvation, as the God who predestined our salvation, to the praise of his glory. And he portrays believers as people who in Christ Jesus inherit great privileges and blessings. This book is rich in doctrine (ch. 1 – 3) as well as practical teaching (ch. 4 – 6).

Ephesians is placed among the ‘prison letters’, letters written by Paul when he was in prison in Rome. The other prison letters are Colossians, Philippians and Philemon. It was probably written around AD60, although some scholars want to place it much later and also question its authorship.

Some early manuscripts omit the word ‘Ephesians’ in the text of verse 1. Because of this, and the lack of personal greetings at the end, the lack of any specific problem in the church being addressed, as well as the sense that Paul did not know the recipients personally (he had only ‘heard’ of their faith – 1:15) it is held that this letter was not intended for the Ephesians alone. Some think it is the letter written to the church at Laodicea (Colossians 4:16). It is best to take it as a circular letter carried by Tychicus along with the letter to the Colossian church (Ephesians 6:21, Colossians 4:7). If this letter was meant to be read in all the churches of Asia this would explain the lack of personal references and instructions on local issues.

Ephesus was of course a church well known to Paul. He visited this city briefly on his first missionary journey, but on his second journey spent over two years preaching the gospel and establishing the church in Ephesus. Ephesus was a port city on an important trade route to Rome. It was famous for its pagan temple to the goddess Artemis (or Diana). Paul’s preaching brought him into conflict with the guardians of this pagan religion.

Paul

Who was Paul? Paul was a Jew, a member of the strict sect of Pharisees. He was zealous for the law and traditions of the Jews. He saw ‘followers of the Way’ or Christians a threat to the traditions which he cherished. In his desire to stamp out this new sect he set out one day for Damascus to hunt down and eliminate Christians.

On the way to Damascus Paul was confronted by the risen Jesus. It was a day he would never forget. It was a day in which his life totally changed. He thought Jesus was dead, but this day heard his voice. Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit and told to go and preach the gospel to the Gentiles. When he began this ministry his birth name of Saul, a distinctly Jewish name, was changed to Paul which means ‘little’ or ‘lesser one’.

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God (1:1). Paul regarded meeting the risen Jesus as qualifying him to be an apostle. Apostle simply means ‘sent one’, but there was a special category of apostles, men who had seen the risen Jesus, apostles who were called and sent by Jesus. There were twelve such apostles. Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ – he was sent by Jesus to serve Jesus. At the same time this was all *by the will of God*. It was not his own choice to be an apostle, nor was he sent by his family, his peers or the church. It was the will of God the Father.

As an apostle Paul wrote with divine authority. He may not have been a man with a commanding presence nor a powerful preacher, but he knew he was called by God to preach the gospel and build up the church. He was prepared to suffer and even die in carrying out this solemn responsibility. He wrote this letter with apostolic authority.

Meeting the risen Jesus on the Damascus road affected Paul in the depth of his being. He became a new creation in Christ Jesus. He taught that if anyone is Christ he is a new creation (II Corinthians 5:17). As you enter a new year is it not a good time to re-assess you status as a new creation in Christ Jesus. What is your relationship to Christ? What is your relationship to the world? Reading this letter will assist in making such as assessment of your life.

Saints

Paul addressed the letter ‘*to the saints*’ (1:1). He was not writing to dead people to whom the church had given the title ‘saint’. It is quite a business getting the Pope to recognize you as a saint. Apart from being dead, you have to have performed at least two miracles. The truth of the Bible is that if you believe in Jesus Christ you are a saint. Any and every believer is a saint.

What does saint mean? The Greek word is “hagios” which means ‘holy’. Holy means to be separate so ‘saint’ means ‘separated one’. A saint is one who is called by God and set apart in Jesus Christ – a new creation in other words. The people of Israel were chosen by God and made a separate people. They were a holy nation, a people belonging to God. The Bible uses the same words in referring to New Testament believers (I Peter 2:9). Within the church, of which Christ is the head, all believers are saints.

The saints are also described as *faithful in Christ Jesus* (1:1). It is of course by grace through faith that they are in Christ Jesus and called ‘saints’ or ‘holy ones’. The Greek word for ‘faithful’ is the same as that for ‘believing’. It can have an active sense – to be faithful – or a

passive sense – to have faith. Language teachers call these the imperative and indicative mood.

It is very important to understand this distinction. You will find that the first part of this letter is all in the indicative. It is about what Christ has done for us. The second half is full of imperatives, telling you how to be faithful as a saint. Some Christians overemphasize the former. They think that because they elect and in Christ it does not matter how they live in this world. Some are so conscious of their divine election and their ‘sainthood’ that they do not want to join with other believers in fellowship. On the other hand some forget the former and think that how they live in this world is all that is important. They seek to be saved by their good works. In this letter the apostle dismisses both these views.

‘The saints appear to be in two places at once. They are in Christ and they are also in Ephesus. These two locations frame the whole of Paul’s message. In chapters 1 – 3 he is describing what it means to be in Christ – how that has been planned and accomplished. In chapters 4 – 6 he is describing how to work out this new life while still living in Ephesus’.

God and Jesus

The greeting Paul sends to these saints is *grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* (1:2). This is his standard greeting. The Jews used the greeting ‘shalom’ or ‘peace’. The Greeks would speak of grace. But Paul filled these terms with his own meaning.

Grace is the unmerited favour of God in sending his own Son Jesus to the Cross. Grace is at the centre of the gospel. By grace you have been saved through faith (2:8). While we were still sinners Christ died for us. Our salvation is all of grace. The gospel is grace from beginning to end.

For Paul peace was not just outward peace, or the absence of conflict. It was inner peace, the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Such peace flows from grace. Because we are saved by grace through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). Grace and peace are given by God and Jesus.

In each of these three verses Paul names the name that is above every name, the name of Jesus. Paul lived ‘in Christ’ every day and exhorts us to do the same. He said for ‘me to live in Christ’ (Philippians 1:21). Is this how you regard Christ who saved you from sin by his own precious blood? Paul never forgot that day on the Damascus road when Jesus graciously appeared to him, forgiving his sin and calling him to follow him even unto death.

We about to enter a book like no other. Are you as excited as I am?

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