

Gathering Up All Things

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,
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Text: Ephesians 1:10

“...a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” ~St. Paul

The Ephesian church was one of Paul’s favorites. He stayed with the congregation longer than almost any other church, save perhaps Corinth. On his last voyage to Jerusalem, he stopped for a while to meet with the elders of the Ephesian church for a fond and tearful farewell.¹ Scholars see the *Letter to the Ephesians* as a compendium of Paul’s teachings, perhaps a manual left with churches for study when Paul and his fellow workers moved on to found churches in other places. Though the manuscript we have is addressed to the Ephesians, it could have been copied and used by many churches for developing disciples. It is also valuable for us to study to understand the first generation’s ideas about our faith as we seek to grow in grace today.

It is easy to miss in the language of the first chapter much important teaching. It reads to us, at first, like *Bible-speak*. But there are some real insights here. Four things to note in this opening passage from Paul’s letter:

1. The Apostle taught there are two worlds, the one we know and inhabit, and another one, alongside ours, that is the realm of God.
2. Faith is not just a set of beliefs, but a relationship with God.
3. There is a different way Christians look at things, a different perspective on reality.
4. We believe what we believe, know what we know, and hope for what we hope so that we ‘might live for the praise of [God’s] glory.’

First, the Apostle taught that there are two worlds, the one we inhabit and another one, alongside ours, that is the realm of God. “[The Father] *has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places....*”² The other world is just as real as the one we know and from time to time it intersects ours. We have moments of insight, flashes of revelation about how things truly are. There are times when we vividly sense God’s nearness. There are other moments when we feel we are in the presence of God. Those are the rare but real moments of grace, when God’s realm and ours intersect. Paul wrote:

¹ Acts 20:37-38.

² Ephesians 1:3. Though most English translations call this other world, “the heavenly places,” the Greek literally says, “the heavenlies.”

“In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, *to the praise of his glory.*”³

That last phrase, “*to the praise of his glory,*” is a recurring one in this opening passage. Our mystical insight into the two kingdoms, one of this world and one of God’s, is all for a purpose, God’s purpose, and for ‘the praise of his glory.’

Second, faith is not just a set of beliefs, but a relationship with God. “[The Father] *destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace....*”⁴ Here, the Apostle affirmed that we are not just philosophers with special insight into God’s knowledge. God has invited and welcomed us into the divine family. We have this special bond with God through Jesus Christ. In his hymn lyric, Watts spoke of this same intimate relationship:

O may Your house be my abode, And all my works be praise,
There would I find a settled rest, While others go and come;
No more a stranger or a guest, But like a child at home.⁵

Third, there is a different way we Christians look at things, a different perspective on reality. “[The Father] *has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ.*”⁶ I am increasingly aware of this different perspective Christians have when I counsel young couples who come to our church for a wedding. (We attract all types at the Congregational Church.) Two of my questions to couples are ‘*What church did you grow up in?*’ and ‘*Why do you want to be married in a church?*’ For the many whose contact with Christianity is two generations back, their idea of marriage, family and sexual values is often extremely different from ours. We should not be surprised—for we do have a different way of looking at life. The Apostle wrote that God made known the mystery of his will to us in Christ. Today this perspective comes from our grasping the teachings of Scripture. We look at things from Jesus’ point of view. It changes the way we make choices. Let’s not apologize for that or try to smooth over the differences. We think differently; we are different!

And last, we believe what we believe, we know what we know, and we hope for what we hope so that we ‘might live for the praise of [God’s] glory.’ “... *We, who were the first to set our*

³ Ephesians 1:13-14.

⁴ Ephesians 1:5. Note again: “to the praise of his ... grace.”

⁵ Watts, Isaac. *My Shepherd Will Supply My Need.*

⁶ Ephesians 1:9.

hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.”⁷ Here is the bottom line, the real point of Christian discipleship. It is to live our lives as God intends. At the end of our days, we hope to meet Christ and hear, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant!”⁸ Whatever we do, whatever way we live, we accomplish it ‘for the praise of his glory.’

To summarize: first, the Apostle taught there are two worlds, the one we know and inhabit, and another one, alongside ours, that is the realm of God. Second, faith is not just a set of beliefs, but a relationship with God. Third, there is a different way Christians look at things, a different perspective on reality. And fourth, we believe what we believe, know what we know, and hope for what we hope so that we ‘might live for the praise of [God’s] glory.’

What Paul taught here is the Christian view that Christ is leading the world to *one* end. We are lately fascinated with multiplicity and diversity, and that is all well and good. God made us so that we differ widely, but that is not the end all and be all. Paul believed in a grand plan, a unifying understanding of all reality, “*a plan,*” he wrote, “*for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*”⁹ The whole universe is headed one way—at times unwillingly—but inexorably headed toward the Maker. God’s values are ultimate, even now when disputed, because in the end, these are the values by which all will be counted worthy or unworthy. Moreover, Christ will gather us, as a hen does her chicks,¹⁰ and everyone will stand before God. At that moment, it will not be about ‘doing our own thing’ or ‘just being ourselves.’ All of that has its time and place, but in the end it will be about who has lived to *the praise of his glory.*

In Christ we have ... obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, ... the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.

May God help us to that end and toward reunion with Christ and God’s family.

End

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⁷ Ephesians 1:12.

⁸ Matthew 25:21.

⁹ Ephesians 1:10.

¹⁰ Matthew 23:37.