A Gospel Greeting

Text: Ephesians 1:1-2

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**Scriptures:** Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ephesians 1:1-14

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 391, 51b, 69b, 204, 310

Series: Ephesians (#1)

Theme: The Apostle Paul, a converted, commissioned man under God’s direction, greets fellow new creations in Christ who live in Asia Minor as he prepares to write to a community of people who have been set apart in Christ through the grace and peace that God has bestowed on them.

Proposition:  Brothers and sisters, God’s grace and peace in Christ have made us new people set apart to be the church.

*“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 1.1-2)*

**Introduction**

Ten years ago one billion letters were sent through the national mail service, this is now down to 380 million letters annually (that’s almost a third). There were 65.8 million fewer letters sent in the past 12 months. Letter volumes continue to drop in New Zealand with more and more electronic communication. An email is free, requires no stamp and results in almost instantaneous delivery.

Physical letter writing may be very much a thing of the past today, but until recently, it was quite a thing in the past! Did you know that there was a postal service in the Roman Empire? It was an extensive network whereby a relay service was maintained with horses and carriages stationed along the roads. Messages could thereby travel up to 80kms per day; even faster in an emergency. There was a catch with this impressive service: only the Emperor together with his officials and friends could send their mail this way.

Others, like Paul, needed to organize their own messengers if they wanted to have a letter delivered (Phil 2:25; Col 4:7-8). New Testament mailmen include Epaphroditus and Tychicus.

Letters have a long history as we see from many examples of written communication in the Old Testament (e.g. 2 Sam 11; 1 Ki 21; 2 Ki 5; 10; 20; 2 Chron 30;32; Ezra 4-5; 7; Ne 2;6 Est 1; 3; 8-9; Isa 37; 39; Jer 29).

In the Greek and Roman world, letters were sometimes used for a wider purpose than just private or official communication, they could be a form of publication with a broad audience in mind. This is very much the character of the letter to the Ephesians as we’ll see now as we focus on the first two verses under three headings:

1. A new man on a mission
2. A new people set apart
3. A new work of God in Christ
4. **A new man on a mission**

Emails have a ‘from’ address and a ‘to’ address. The communication identifies the sender and the recipient(s). Letters ordinarily do the same. The letter to the Ephesians follows this pattern.

The first word of this letter identifies the author: “Paul”. Although there have been suggestions by some Bible commentators (esp. E.J. Goodspeed) that this epistle was actually written by an admirer of Paul (perhapsOnesimus, the converted slave about whom he wrote to Philemon). However, this theory lacks evidence. We can say with confidence that the writer is Paul, the Apostle, who was in prison, most likely in Rome, when he penned this letter (60-62AD).

As we know from the book of Acts, Paul had previously been known as Saul. Saul was a Hebrew version of the Greek name Paul. Shortly after Saul’s dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-31), Luke refers to him as Paul (Acts 13:9). On that road he had an encounter with Jesus Christ who said to him: “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting*”. (Acts 9:4-5). Christ instructed him to go onto Damascus. Saul, now blind, obeyed. In Damascus, a disciple of Jesus called Ananias, was instructed by the Lord to lay hands on Saul, which he did saying: "*Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit*." (Acts 9.17).

And so it was that Paul was transformed, he was born again, and he became one of many in whom the promise of the new covenant was fulfilled (Jer 31:31-34). Then, in the new covenant words of Jeremiah, Paul knew the Lord and the Lord forgave his iniquity and remembered his sin no more. He became a new man in Christ.

The Lord also called Paul as His commissioned messenger “*a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel*” (Acts 9.15). Paul, who had been known as Saul, became an apostle. The word apostle means messenger, envoy or ambassador. It refers to a person sent by another. In this case by God Himself.

Paul’s background, as a former enemy of Christ’s church, was different from that of the other apostles. He was not one of the disciples who had followed Jesus whilst Christ lived on this earth. However, like the disciples who became apostles, he had experienced a resurrection appearance of Christ (on the Damascus road). He claimed to have ‘seen the Lord’ (1 Cor 9:1).

Paul was sent by Christ; he had not chosen himself. He was ‘*an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God’.* God had willed that this uniquely qualified man would be the author of more books of the Bible than any other single writer - under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (13 NT books are attributed to Paul). Like his father before him, Paul was a Pharisee (Acts 23:6). He was a learned man who had an in-depth knowledge of the Old Testament. He was educated by the prominent Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).

Not only did he have impeccable Jewish credentials – a ‘Hebrew of Hebrews’ (Phil 3:5), he was also a Roman citizen born in Tarsus – a prosperous city in the province of Cilicia. His Roman citizenship gave him special privileges, assisted in his ease of travel, and at times saved him from further harm (Acts 22:25-29).

He was a leader in the early church and an effective teacher (Acts 9:22). He was a missionary, making multiple journeys to various cities in Asia and Europe, each excursion lasting several years. Everywhere he went, Paul established Christian communities, later corresponding with these churches, visiting them again if, and when, he could. Paul, together with the other apostles performed miracles (Acts 13;11; 14:8-10; 16:16-18; 19:11-12; 20:9-12; 28:3-5; 8).

God had selected Paul who, by his own admission, was the most unlikely candidate for an ambassador of Christ.

* A man who described Himself as the foremost or chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:15).
* A blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man (1 Tim 1:13).
* He had approved the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1).

Above all, Paul was a man who had personally experienced the power of the gospel. He writes to Timothy that ‘*I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen’*. (1 Tim 1:16-17).

Paul was now a man who lived for Christ (Gal 2:20). Paul was **a new man on a mission** for the Lord. The gospel realities of which he writes in this letter are truths that he knew personally, having experienced the mercy, grace and love of the lord he had once opposed.

How about you? Have you personally experienced the power of the gospel? Are you also a new person in Christ? Are you one of many new people set apart by God?

1. **A new people set apart**

Having introduced himself, Paul then identifies those to whom he is writing:*To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus.* ‘Saint’ is one of those Biblical words which is widely misunderstood by many in the world who think of a ‘saint’ as being a person who exhibits an enormous amount of holiness, likeness or closeness to God. Historically this exceptional holiness has often been represented in artworks with a halo – a bright crown, circle or disk of light surrounding the head of a ‘saint’.

Holiness is certainly a central characteristic of a saint. In the Old Testament the holy was separated from the unholy; for example the altar (Ex 29:37) and priestly garments (Ex 31:10). This separation was to reflect the ‘apartness’ of God, who is perfectly holy – set apart - from this fallen world. Holiness for God’s people was to be a way of life ‘*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy*’ (Lev 19:2). This is a truth which remains unchanged in the New Testament (1 Peter 1:5).

In the New Testament the word ‘saint’ is used to refer to all those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour (e.g. Acts 9:13; 32; 41). In the book of Revelation saints are those who not only name Jesus as their Lord, but are faithful and true witnesses for Christ (e.g. 13:10; 16:6; 19:8). The early church rightly considered those who were martyred for their witness to Christ as saints. However subsequently these ‘saints’ were given special honour and even worshipped by some.

Biblically a saint is a person who believes in Christ Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and who bears true and faithful witness to Christ in their speech and conduct; that is in their whole lifestyle. A saint is a person who has been transformed, who has been born again and then becomes one of many in whom the promise of the new covenant was fulfilled (Jer 31:31-34). In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, a saint knows the Lord and the Lord forgives his or her iniquity and remembers his or her sin no more.

A saint is a new person in Christ. Paul reflects this truth in his address to the saints who are ‘*faithful in Christ Jesus*’. Were these believers to whom Paul wrote only in the Ephesian church, or did he write to a wider group of churches? To answer this question, we need to consider a few things:

* It’s clear from this letter that Paul did not personally know many of the people to whom he was writing; he had heard of their faith and love (1:15).
* However, he had previously had very close fellowship with the church in Ephesus, remaining there for 3 years teaching and admonishing the people there. His departure was a tearful farewell as they did not expect to be able to see Paul again (Acts 20:16-38).
* Some of the older Greek manuscript copies of this letter do not include ‘in Ephesus’ in v1, instead just having the text “to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus’.
* The letter to the Ephesians lacks personal greetings; in contrast to Paul’s other letters.

These facts are evidence that this letter was not sent specifically to the Ephesian church, but was intended as for a wider audience, possibly in the Lycus valley, including Laodicea (ref. Col 4:16). It seems likely that Ephesians was written as a ‘circular’ letter to various local churches in the vicinity of Ephesus. This is a communication intended for a local church or local churches.

Congregation, brothers and sisters in Christ, this letter, being part of God’s Holy Word, is written to us as the Reformed Church of Christchurch. The letter we know as ‘Ephesians’ presents a series of glorious pictures of the community of saints, new people in Christ who are His church:

* A ‘colony’ of new creations established as a foretaste of the renewed unity and dignity of the human race (1:10-14; 2:11-22; 3:6, 9-11; 4:1-6:9). A family where relationships are transformed (2:1-10; 4:1-16; 4:32-5:2; 5:22-6:9).
* A new temple constructed of people (2:19-22; 3:17-19).
* A living organism where power and authority are exercised by Christ (1:22; 5:25-27) and where stewardship of His church is a way of serving Him (4;11-16; 5:22-6:9).
* An oasis of light in a dark world (Eph 5:3-17).
* A bride being prepared for the approach of her loving husband (5:22-32).

It is written so that we might more fully comprehend, embrace and be built up by the ‘*unsearchable riches of Christ*’ (Eph 3:8).

How do you think about the church? This local church? How do you think about yourself? Are you a saint?

Brothers and sisters, we are a new people set apart by God, a congregation declared ‘holy’ by the Lord because of the holiness of Christ. This is a ‘new’ work of God in Christ Jesus.

1. **A new work of God in Christ**

Paul greets the saints to whom he is writing with the words: *“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”. (v2)* The usual Jewish greeting was and is still ‘Shalom’ – peace. Paul adds to this the word ‘grace’. Grace is God’s unconditional favour towards men, women and children. God’s grace and peace are most supremely conveyed in the gospel – the good news of salvation in Christ. This is then **a gospel greeting** from the apostle Paul, who is a new man in Christ to local congregations of new people set apart by Christ.

This letter will take up the themes of grace and peace and beautifully express the glorious work of God our Father through His Son. This was a **new work of God in Christ** which had occurred less than 30 years before this letter was written. Paul describes this as a ‘mystery’ (1:9; 3:3,4,6,9; 5:32; 6:19). What he means with this word is something that was once hidden, but is now being revealed. He writes that God has now made known ‘*the* ***mystery*** *of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ*’ (1:9).

This new work of God is a purpose which began before time started. It is a purpose by which God’s grace is conveyed to a new humanity chosen for adoption into God’s family from before the foundation of the world (1:4-5). It has always been God’s will to save a people from the non-Jewish nations; as He first revealed to Abraham (Gen 12:3). Now in Christ, this is revealed as Paul writes: “*This* ***mystery*** *is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel*” (3:6).

The saints to whom Paul wrote this letter were mainly gentiles, (non-Jews) who had received saving grace in Christ. Unlike many other letters of Paul’s in the New Testament, Ephesians does not address any particular controversies, divisions, or difficulties in a local church, the main focus is the mystery of the church. The revelation that the New Testament church is a new work of God in Christ in which both Jews and Gentiles form the body of Christ – ‘*the fullness of him who fills all in all*’ (1:22).

Paul includes the words ‘grace’ and ‘peace’ in his gospel greeting and then returns to these immeasurably rich words in his letter. It is by **grace** (God’s unconditional, undeserved, unmerited favour) that the saints to whom Paul writes have been saved “*For by* ***grace*** *you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*” (2:8).

Those who have received grace are called to extend grace, as Paul will express in this letter: “*Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give* ***grace*** *to those who hear*” (Eph 4:29).

The **peace** of which Paul writes is much deeper and broader than the traditional Jewish greeting ‘Shalom’. This peace is first and foremost a relationship of harmony, acceptance and love with God Himself. This peace has come because of Christ, in whom ‘*we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace*’ (1:7). In Christ, there is no longer a separation between the sinner, now forgiven, and God the Almighty Creator and Judge. In Christ alone there is true peace between the Redeemer and the redeemed.

This peace is first and foremost a restored ‘vertical’ relationship with God, but it is also a restored set of ‘horizontal’ relationships with other new people who have been set apart. In times past there was a separation between Gentiles and Jews, but now that the mystery of the gospel has been revealed, now that Christ has come, those Gentiles who were outside are now in. “*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our* ***peace****, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility*” (2:13-14). Gentiles believers are now ‘*fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God*’ (2:19).

There is now a call to all who belong to the new humanity in Christ to reflect the peace which God has graciously given to them in their lives. Paul writes “*I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of* ***peace***” (4:1-3).

Brothers and sisters, this **gospel greeting** at the beginning of Paul’s letter comes to us as a local church today. We too, like those who first heard the words of this letter, are those who have received God’s grace and enjoy a peace which Christ has won for us. We are new creations in Christ (2 Cor 5:17), new people brought into the new community of the church. People who have been transformed, who have been born again and who are amongst the many in whom the promise of the new covenant was fulfilled (Jer 31:31-34).

Brother and sisters, we know the Lord. We are new people in Christ. People, not of a single ethnic origin, but very diverse, united in one body, one Spirit, one Lord and one faith. Called to live as the people God says we are: holy, set apart, saints. Called to extend grace to one another, as God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ have extended far greater grace to us. Called to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in the church. Called to be the Body of Christ in this place.

As we look into the letter to the Ephesians in more detail in the months to come, my prayer is that we will all marvel at the mystery of the gospel now revealed and see the glory of Christ ever more clearly than we did before.

AMEN.