

Hope Christian Church  
Todd Cravens  
28 March 2015

Sermon Series: *The Book of Ephesians*



# A Plan for the Fullness of Time

Palm Sunday

(Ephesians 1:7-10 ESV)

*<sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, <sup>8</sup> which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

## Introduction

When I was in college I was given an assignment to write a three page essay on any painting of my choice. I went across the street to the art gallery and chose a painting. At first, I thought there's no way I would be able to finish the assignment, for who can write three pages on a painting. However, as I began to actually look at the painting and contemplate all it contained, a story did indeed begin to emerge.

We can pass quickly by and see only a painting, or we can stop and look and listen and wait and attend and see a story.

We can do the same with our Bible reading. We can pass quickly through the reading and check off the box on our "to do" list and be done with it. Or we can prayerfully read these words while seeking help from the Holy Spirit to open up the eyes of our hearts so that we can see Jesus in what we read.

We can do the same with the letter of Paul to the Ephesians. We can pass quickly through it and see cool biblical trivia or fascinating historical information and say, "OK, we've made it through that book." Or we can prayerfully ponder these words and expectantly linger through this holy literature while waiting upon the Holy Spirit and we will see the living Christ who is the "radiance of the glory of God the Father and the exact imprint of his nature."<sup>1</sup>

Please pray with me, that as we move through this letter, the Spirit of God will give us understanding and wisdom and spiritual insight, in opening up our spiritual eyes that we will see Jesus in all truth and in the fullness of who he is. We don't want to miss him.

We don't want to miss him like Jerusalem did 2,000 years ago. On this day, over 2,000 years ago, Jerusalem welcomed him with palm branches as he rode into the city on a donkey, fulfilling an ancient prophecy of Zechariah, to celebrate Passover. They welcomed him with shouts of joy so loud that you could feel the noise in your feet as the sound waves pulsed through the stone streets. They welcomed him on Sunday and yet they crucified him on Friday.

And yet both responses, both the welcome and the crucifixion, unfolded as part of God's great, grand, gracious plan for the fullness of time. That plan was a gracious plan that what bring us salvation.

Pray.

**Ephesians 1:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses,*

---

<sup>1</sup> Heb 1:3.

**In him.** “*In him.*” In Christ. In him. Through Jesus. In the Beloved. In him. In Christ. In him. In him. In Christ. In him. In him. In him. Twelve times<sup>2</sup> “in him,” in vs. 3-14, *to the praise of his glorious grace!* This paragraph is so unapologetically Christ-centered and God-glorifying. This whole paragraph is about what God the Father has done, for his children, through Jesus and the subsequent giving of the Holy Spirit (v.13-14). Something massive happened in Jesus. Something with eternal consequences unfolded in Jerusalem all those years ago. Something absolutely unique took place in March 29 A.D. 33.<sup>3</sup> Something that has not happened anywhere else in the history of this universe! Something that was planned from before the foundation of the world. And it all happened “in him!” God is not silent. He has spoken through his Son. God is not inactive. He has worked through his Son. In him, i.e. in Jesus, God has blessed all the nations of the earth, just as he promised Abraham he would.

**Genesis 22:18 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> *and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed...*

This verse is what Paul is expounding in these opening lines of his letter to the Ephesians. He is counting the blessings that come through Jesus. Paul is counting his blessings and he is naming them one by one. He is also counting *your* blessings, too, *if* you are in Christ. And if you are not in Christ, you could be, if only you would put your faith in Jesus and rest your whole-hearted trust for the salvation of your soul **in him**.

In case your counting, he’s on blessing number three. The first blessing is that believers had been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless, which enables us to stand before God in the sweetness of unashamed friendship being fully loved by and in love with God.

The second blessing is that God in all the fullness of his love predestined us rebellious traitors, not to destruction, which we deserve, but to adoption, as sons—which we do not deserve. He did not punish us according as our sins justly deserved, but he predestined us to adoption as his children. Even though we were rebels and haters of God, even his enemies, in love he predestined us to adoption, to become his legal, legitimate children.

Then he moves on to the third blessing, the blessing of **redemption**.

**Ephesians 1:7 (ESV)**

*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses,*

*In him we have redemption through his blood.* In him, we presently have redemption. We have right now. Those who are in Christ already have this redemption right now. It is ours. It

---

<sup>2</sup> One additional time, which is not included in most English translations, is found at the end of verse 10.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, Justin Taylor & Alexander Stewart. *The Final Days of Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 53.

belongs to us. It is not some future gift. No. It is a present blessing. It is ours. It belongs to everyone who is in Christ. Well what is it? What is this 'redemption?'

Redemption is "deliverance by payment of ransom." This refers to an objective fact regarding your salvation. A payment has been made which has set you free. This is not something you have done. This is somewhat that God through Jesus has done. This happened completely independent from your will. This refers to something that Jesus chose to do for you before you ever chose to believe in what he did.

**(Matthew 20:28 ESV)**

*<sup>28</sup> even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Jesus came to serve us by giving his life as a ransom for many people. The ransom that was paid secured our deliverance. The price paid was enough to set us free. What was the cost? It was his blood.

**Ephesians 1:7 (ESV)**

*In him we have redemption through his blood.*

The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). In order to free us from the grip of death, because of our sins, someone's blood must be shed.

**Hebrews 9:22 (ESV)**

*"Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins."*

Jesus chose to pay the price of our freedom from sin in the currency of his own blood. Blood was the price, and so Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. He paid the price. He secured our freedom. He redeemed us through the shedding of his blood.

What was the result? Forgiveness of sins and our trespasses. Because his blood was shed on our behalf, the shedding of ours is not required. **Trespasses** are willful crossings of known boundaries. It refers to intentional deviation from what one knows to be right. Jesus not only forgives us of our unintentional sins, but he also forgives us of the one we *do* intend. Jesus not only purchased our forgiveness of sins we didn't mean to commit. He also paid for the sins we fully intended to commit. Which is easier to forgive, unintentional sins or intentional ones?

**An Accidental Trip or An Intentional Trip?**

Which is easier to forgive? If you are passing by me as you're walking to your chair and I begin to stretch and stick out my legs and accidentally trip you and you spill your coffee and your Bible and yourself all over the floor. I say, "I'm so sorry. I didn't see you coming and it was silly of me to stick out my legs in the aisle. Please forgive me."

Or imagine that I saw you coming the whole time and only pretended to stretch so that I could trip you and cause you to spill your coffee and your Bible and your self all over the floor and then quickly chuckled to myself. That's an entirely different event.

Intentional sins are far more difficult to forgive because there is malice behind them. Unintentional sins are much easier to forgive for there is no malice behind them. Intentional sins are much more costly. Paul knows this. And he wants believers to know that the forgiveness purchased by Christ is not a shallow bucket of forgiveness which is quickly spent, but rather a deep well of forgiveness which will never run dry.

## The Lavishly Rich Blessing of God's Grace

The forgiveness of our trespasses, our intentional sins, is...

**Ephesians 1:7-8 (ESV)**

*according to the riches of his grace,<sup>8</sup> which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight,*

Paul describes the forgiveness which we have received. He uses the adjective '**riches**,' to modify God's grace. Grace means receiving what one does not deserve. By its very nature, the word refers to a good abundance. Yet Paul adds to it, the word '*riches*.' Grace itself is an abundant word and yet that is not sufficient to convey the whole meaning. He adds the riches onto it. God, in Christ, does not merely give us the grace of forgiveness, he **richly** gives us the grace of forgiveness. God does not merely give grace, he gives grace richly! He is full of grace. Yet even this is not enough to describe God's work in Christ.

God gives grace, Amen. But more than that, God gives grace richly. Amen, and amen. But even more than that, God **lavishes** the riches of his grace upon his people! Amen, and amen, and amen!! God is overflowing with grace. He is not just rich in grace, he is *lavishly* rich in grace! And there is nothing better than this news to those of us who have failed, not merely unintentionally, but bullheadedly, stubbornly, and highhandedly intentional.

We might believe that God can be gracious to us when we accidentally make mistakes and sin unintentionally. And we can believe that he can be even more gracious towards us than even the most forgiving among us. However, it's hard for us to believe that he can still be gracious toward us after extended periods of willful rebellion. Yet God lavishes the riches of his grace upon his children.

## God's Lavish Grace on the Prodigal Son

It was grace that the Prodigal son was seeking when he planned to ask his father for a job on the farm. He didn't deserve to even have a job on the family farm. Yet his father not only gave him the grace of a job, he ran out of town to meet him. The son never expected that kind of grace.

And the father didn't stop there. He called for a new robe and new sandals to be fetched. The son never expected that kind of grace. And not only did the father send for new robe and new shoes, he also called for a gold ring to be given to the son. The son never even dreamed of such a grace filled reception. His father was not just gracious, he was rich in grace. But even more astounding than that, was the party! The son didn't merely get a new wardrobe and a new ring, his father threw him a village-wide celebration!! He killed the fattened calf. He threw a party and invited the whole town! His father was not just gracious, or even richly gracious, his father was *lavishly* gracious! This is our God and it was the blood of Jesus that purchased this lavish grace for us. But there's more.

God not only forgave our trespasses in Christ. He did even more than that. God didn't merely say,

"OK. I forgive you, now go to your room and stay there. I know you've sinned and I will forgive your sins. We can put the past behind us, but your sins are serious, and so I will no longer allow you to get close to me. I will forgive you and take care of you, but I will not let you into my heart."

No. God is not like that. God is not merely gracious. He *lavishes* his grace upon us ***in all wisdom and insight***.

You might be tempted to read that last phrase in verse eight, "***in all wisdom and insight***," and think that Paul is talking about God. He's not. Paul's not talking about God. He's talking about us. He's continuing to describe the activity of God's grace in our lives, in granting us *wisdom and insight*.

One way of taking this verse is to understand that phrase to go with what preceded it as modifying the way in which God lavished his grace upon us—namely, *in all wisdom and insight*. If understood in this way, Paul is saying, "It was really wise and insightful of God to be so lavish in granting his grace to such undeserving people. This was a really good plan." Is that what Paul is saying? Would Paul really be so arrogant as to assert his own superior intellect over God in such a way that he would condescend to congratulate God for figuring out and implementing such a wise and insightful plan? I don't think so.

Or should we understand this phrase, "in all wisdom and insight" as going with what follows it, namely as modifying the way in which ***God made known to us the mystery of his will***? If we understand this phrase in this way, then what Paul is saying is that God in all of his lavish grace, not only redeemed us from slavery to sin and forgave all of our trespasses, but he also granted to us wisdom and insight so that we could know and understand his will. In other words, God not only said,

“Okay, I forgive you of your willful sins. I completely wipe them all away. Come back home to me. I’m not sending you to your room, I want you to come into *my* room. I’m not only merely welcoming you home, I’m also going to give you the *wisdom and insight* you need in order for you to truly know me. I’m going to open up my heart to you. I will give you insight so that you will understand me and wisdom so that you can truly *know* me.”

## Seeing Is Not Believing

It is only by the great wonderfully rich, and lavish grace of God that anyone can truly know him. Apart from him revealing himself to us, we would never know him. If he does not give us eyes to see, then we will never see. If God, in his great lavish grace, does not give us ears to hear, then we will never hear. If God did not come to us and give us wisdom and insight, we would continue in our natural state of spiritual blindness never yearning to know God at all.

Merely seeing the great, and mighty, and wonderful works of God is insufficient to transform our hearts into lovers of God. We need a deeper work of transforming grace to cause us to love God.

The children of Israel saw all the wonders of God’s power as he poured out his great might in Egypt. They saw miracle after miracle after miracle and yet 15 minutes after *the* most astounding oceanic miracle<sup>4</sup> ever to be performed either before or after the creation of the world—the parting of the Red Sea—they turned around and started grumbling and complaining and throwing a tantrum saying, “Awe shucks, this place is horrible. It’s so hot and miserable and we have to walk everywhere and there’s nothin’ to eat and nothin’ to drink out here in this silly wilderness. I wish we’d died back in Egypt. At least back there we had lots of water and there was a nice breeze and we had whole pots full of meat and then there was the All-You-Can-Eat Nile Bread Buffet, man, those were the days! But out here in this dumb-ol’ wilderness, we’re all gonna die of starvation.”<sup>5</sup>

And so, amazingly, Moses, just before he’s about to die, stands before the people and explains this to them.

**(Deuteronomy 29:4 ESV)**

*<sup>4</sup> But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.*

Moses knew and understood that salvation requires a work of God upon the sinful human heart. An abundance of valid evidence is not enough to transform the heart of man. That generation of Israelites had more valid physical, archeological and geological evidence for a

---

<sup>4</sup> Ex 14.

<sup>5</sup> See Ex 16:1-3.

saving belief in God than any other generation of people on the face of the planet and yet almost the whole generation died in the wilderness because of their unbelief. *Salvation requires the work of the Holy Spirit. **Understanding that leads to salvation requires wisdom and insight which only comes from the gracious work of God.***

(Deuteronomy 31:27, 29 ESV)

*<sup>27</sup> For I know how rebellious and stubborn you are. Behold, even today while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the Lord. How much more after my death!*

*<sup>29</sup> For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you. And in the days to come evil will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands.*

Yet, this work of the heart which is required for salvation is the very work that was accomplished in Jesus. It is Jesus who sends his Holy Spirit to us. It is Jesus who, through his blood, purchased the right to give us his own Holy Spirit. It is his blood, which is the blood of the new covenant which brought about this great, gracious heart-transforming work of salvation and transformation. The prophet Jeremiah looked forward to the day when Jesus would come and accomplish this work of God. Through Jeremiah God said,

(Jeremiah 24:7 ESV)

*<sup>7</sup> I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.*

No one will know God unless God first gives them a heart to know him. These are those sweet new covenant words. These are the sweetest words in the Bible. God promises to give us the heart we need in order to know him, in order to truly know him. "And they shall be my people and I will be their God and they will return to me with their whole heart."

This will never happen unless God is gracious to us. This will never happen unless God is rich in grace toward us. But praise God for it has happened and it can happen according to God's riches of grace which he lavished on us through Jesus Christ our Lord! In Jesus God has lavished his grace upon us by granting us **wisdom and insight** by...

Ephesians 1:9 (ESV)

*<sup>9</sup> making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ,*

Mystery in the New Testament refers to what has previously been concealed, but is now revealed, or simply "a truth once hidden but now made known" (Rom 11:25; Col 1:26; cf. Matt

13:11, 35).<sup>6</sup> The mystery refers simply to the fact that Jesus is the messiah. The Scriptures have always predicted that God would save his people through messiah, but what was hidden was the identity of messiah. No one knew exactly who he was. However, that once hidden fact, is no longer hidden. God has now revealed that he intends to save his people through Jesus. Godly people had been wanting the answer to this question for generations.

**(1 Peter 1:10-11 ESV)**

*<sup>10</sup> Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully,<sup>11</sup> inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.*

And because God raised him from the dead, we can know that Jesus is the messiah. The identity of messiah is no longer hidden, though, sadly, many Jews still do not see him. And many more non-Jews are not even looking for him.

Here again we are reminded that human wisdom alone cannot recognize Jesus as the messiah. Though Jesus, by the works he did, offered plenty of evidence<sup>7</sup> as to his true identity, many Jews missed him.<sup>8</sup> The mystery of his identity was hidden to the unaided human mind. Perhaps an even better definition of mystery is “that which is undiscoverable to the unaided human mind.”<sup>9</sup> It’s not as though the facts of Jesus’ life themselves are incomprehensible, it is simply that sin so clouds the human mind, that without the aid of the Holy Spirit we are simply unable to rightly discern who Jesus is.

Yet God has plainly declared Jesus to be messiah by raising him from the dead. Here is what Paul preached to the Romans.

**(Acts 17:30-31 ESV)**

*<sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,<sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.*

Here is what Peter preached to Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and his family.

**(Acts 10:40-42 ESV)**

---

<sup>6</sup> A. Skevington Wood, “Ephesians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Mt 11:3-6.

<sup>8</sup> Jn 10:24-25.

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in sermon “The Mystery of His Will,” available at <http://www.mljtrust.org/collections/book-of-ephesians/?page=2> accessed 27 Mar 2015.

<sup>40</sup> but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, <sup>41</sup> not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. <sup>42</sup> And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

The messiah has come. God's anointed, suffering Servant has been identified. Jesus is messiah. Jesus will judge the world, both the living and the dead. This is the plan and **purpose of God which he set forth in Christ** Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth. His life set in motion a more rapid unfolding of God's grand plan. And what is that grand plan? Verse 10 tells us.

**Ephesians 1:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

This world does operate according to a massive plan, a plan for the fullness of time. Jesus' coming indicated the fullness of time. He was born in the fullness of time.

**(Galatians 4:4 ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,

When Jesus began his public ministry he said,

**(Mark 1:14-15 ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Jesus came into this world "at the proper time."<sup>10</sup> His whole life unfolded according to a definite plan,<sup>11</sup> from his birth down to the very details of his death. Dozens of times throughout his ministry his enemies wanted to arrest him, but they were prevented because "his time had not yet come."<sup>12</sup> That means God did not allow them to do what they wanted to do because it did not accord with his divine plan.

God governed the events of Jesus' life and he is still governing the events of this world, according to the purposes of his plan, even if it does not look like it to us. God had revealed the ultimate goal of his work in this world and it is right here in verse ten. His ultimate goal is **to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things in earth.**

---

<sup>10</sup> 1 Tim 2:6.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 2:23.

<sup>12</sup> Jn 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1.

For Paul, when he uses these two terms, things in heaven and things in earth, he means two different realms. Heaven refers to the unseen spiritual realm and earth refers to the visible physical realm. God's plan is to **unite** both of these realms **in Christ**.

The Greek word translated 'unite' (*anakephalaioō*), means to "sum up together again."<sup>13</sup> It means it is God's great plan to **again**, bring all things together in Christ. This means that once before there was a time when all things were united but then it all fell apart. Thus God's great, grand, gracious plan is then to *re-unify* all things in Christ. This is God's plan, to bring together under the Lordship of Jesus, all things, both seen and unseen. God is planning to redo all that undone in the Fall. God will redeem and reconcile all that is broken and bruised because of sin. He will put back together *in Jesus* all that fell apart in sin. This is his plan for the fullness of time.

This is his plan for your soul and for your life. He will pull together all the frayed edges of your frazzled life in Jesus. This world, your life, and all things are intended to find their unity in Jesus. We will never be complete without him. We will never be "summed up together again" apart from Jesus. It may look like everything is falling apart, but God is working out his plan to pull it all together.

On the day Jesus was being crucified it may have looked like Jesus' life was falling apart, but in the apparent destruction and chaos, God was rebuilding what had been destroyed by sin. He was undoing the curse. It may have looked like Jesus was dying, but really he was killing death. The apparent chaos was actually crumbling under the grand unfolding of God's gracious plan.

What looked like punishment and guilt was actually redemption and perfection. What looked like condemnation was redemption and forgiveness through his blood. What looked like poverty and shame was actually lavish riches of grace. What looked like destruction and chaos was actually God the Father, through God the Son, beginning to unite all things in heaven and on earth in a gracious plan for the fullness of time.

---

<sup>13</sup> Wood, *Ephesians*, 26.