

Praise God in Life's Circumstances

Review:

This morning I want to highlight for you the importance of 'understanding the times' in which we live as believers today. I mentioned to you at the start of the year of the importance of discerning the prophetic words that are being shared in the corporate sense of the Body of Christ and as well within our own congregation. I shared a few of my thoughts regarding the 'word of the Lord' being spoken:

- Paradigm shift from "churchianity" to Kingdom orthodoxy and orthopraxy; Kingdom thoughts in action.
- Alignment to Kingdom authority, not simply denominationalism.

I shared the story of a church congregation standing and facing a blank wall and signing "Gloria Patri". One newcomer asks why they did that. The response was "that's how we sing that song". Finally one of the oldest members of the church remembered why; way back when, 100 years ago or so, the words to that song were written on that wall. The point of the story is this: often we lose sight of why we do certain things a certain way. In other words, we just go through the motions of doing church.

I spoke to the Scripture in **Luke 5:33-39** where Jesus is confronted by the religious leaders of his day. Jesus helps us to understand we need to be ready for the new wine when it comes and to have a new wine skin ready. I believe this is why the prophetic voice of the church has been speaking the word 'alignment' for a number of years now. We must align ourselves with the Spirit of God as new wine is poured out upon the church and the world in which we live. This transformation of the Church is like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly, which is a radical change of the inner and outer workings of the insect.

One of the ways we have prepared ourselves over the last few months is to introduce a time of "soaking" prayer before the church service. This is a quiet and reflective time of waiting on God to hear his voice speak to us personally and to prepare us to come into his presence in worship.

Here are two testimonies from our body...

Within these testimonies is God's interaction with us as his children. The goal of the soaking time is not to just wait before God without any response or action on our part. We must be willing to engage intimately with him and also allow the Spirit to move us into accomplishments for the Kingdom of God. In other words, the goal of resting in God is simply – that we may run for God in the fulfillment of his ministry for our lives. Resting then running then resting then running. Just like the cycle of "Apprehending God's Heart and Fulfilling His Dreams..."

Introduction:

I have been praying for the direction of the Lord as related to Sunday mornings and our gathering together. Over the next few months we will be looking at the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians. There are several reasons why I believe the Lord would have us do this:

- Firstly, we have been talking about transformation, new wine and new wine skins. The Church at Ephesus was in the midst of this kind of revolution.
- Secondly, the letter to the Ephesians identifies numerous thoughts for us to explore that highlight the extreme makeover we are experiencing both personally and corporately.

This letter was written by Paul to the congregation in Ephesus which he established most likely on his second missionary journey through Asia Minor. There is some thought that this letter was a circular letter taken around to the various churches of Asia Minor. However, Ephesus was considered a key center for the province of Asia and the Roman Empire, and being a key port city it served the surrounding region as a center for banking and commerce. As well, Ephesus was known for its successful organized religion, both Roman and Jewish in nature. At the time Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the World as a result of the great Temple of Artemis with its 100 columns, which drew tourists and worshipers from all around the known world. The religion of Artemis (the Greek goddess of the moon and of hunting) was mixed together with the various sex and fertility cults of Asia Minor. There is mention of her in **Acts 19:35** – “**the great event of Artemis and of her image which fell from the sky**” adding to her fame and renown. Ephesus was situated in a region full of what we would call today ‘spiritual warfare’. It is this backdrop against which Paul gives us a vision of the church of Jesus Christ.

Over the years many authors have come up with various themes and key ideas for Ephesians. Watchmen Nee’s famous book - Sit Walk Stand, describes his interpretation of Ephesians. Others have said Chapters 1-3 tell us of the Calling of the Church, while Chapters 4-6 speak of the Conduct of the Church. Still others have seen the theme of Ephesians as the contrast between the organized religion of Asia Minor to the Church of Christ as a living organism; i.e. the Body or Family of God as a holy and living temple of believers in stark distinction with the stone temple of Ephesus, and the unholy practices taking place within. For certain the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians is full of truth that will help us understand our personal relationship with Jesus as well as how to live righteously with our fellow Christians.

This letter is one of my favourite not only because of the great doctrine but also because of the amazing things that happened in Ephesus. **Acts 19** records these remarkable encounters.

- Paul baptized about a dozen of John the Baptist’s followers who were then filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues and prophesying (**19:1-7**).
- He had daily discussions in the hall of Tyrannus for two years (**19:8-10**).
- Unusual miracles of healing and deliverance occurred through his apron (**19:11-12**).
- The seven sons of Sceva tried to cast out demons but ran away naked (**19:13-16**).
- Salvations abounded, sorcerers were converted laying down their scrolls (**19:17-20**).
- The city rioted over silversmith Demetrius’ loss of business because of people who turned to Christ from worshipping the great Ephesian goddess Artemis (**19:23-41**).

Ephesians Chapter 1:1-3

One of the many themes found within Ephesians is discovered in the first few verses of chapter one. Paul begins by giving his greetings to the saints in Ephesus. **“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: ² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** He then moves onto describe to the saints at Ephesus a foundational reason God is to be praised – because of the spiritual blessings He has planned for believers in Christ.

Eph 1:3-14

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸ that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. ⁹ And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

There is so much to highlight in this passage that we could not possibly look at everything stated here this morning. One thing to note is this, in the Greek language these 12 verses are all one sentence. It is Paul’s doxology of prayer and praise to God. This morning I want to highlight two thoughts to you that hopefully will inspire your relationship with God.

1. It is a flowing of thought that begins with the exhortation to *praise* God because of the spiritual blessings we have in Jesus Christ. The way Paul uses the word *praise* is not used in classical Greek literature. For example, the Greek gods, like Artemis, are not said to have bestowed any specific act of blessing on anyone but rather they cause good luck or good fortune. However, the verb *to praise* is used over 400 times in the Scriptures, showing that God in heaven gives benefits to his children on earth. The word for “praise and blessed” is the same root word in the Greek language. As we praise (literally – to speak well of) God we in turn are praised or blessed by him; you reap what you sow. If you sow praise to God because of his many benefits you will in turn reap blessings from him. In one sense, God will speak well of you when you speak well of him...

Ephesians 1:3 tells much about God's blessings on believers. God the Father is the supplier in eternity past with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms and received in Christ today. Paul establishes from the very beginning the message of grace.

There are numerous words for praise both in the Old and New Testament. Old Testament praise can be seen in three primary words:

- ❖ Hālal, the root meaning of which is connected with making a noise...
- ❖ Yādā, which was originally associated with the bodily actions and gestures which accompany praising...
- ❖ Zāmar, which is associated with the playing or singing of music...

The whole of the Old Testament is scattered with outbursts of praise. These expressions of praise come from personal encounters with God releasing joy and freedom. At other times praise was commanded by God as his people gathered together for their special feasts. All of this was under the knowledge and influence of the Law of Moses.

In the New Testament Paul can hardly contain his praise for who God is and what he has done for us. The doxologies in almost all the Epistles reveal the real sense of grace experienced by the writers and their readers. As a result of God's blessings, Paul exhorts us to praise and speak well of God.

The coming of the Saviour and his grace into the midst of this world and our lives is seen by the restoration of joy and praise in the hearts of God's people. It is not a quiet expression of God's grace in our lives, but to be a full doxology of praise. Paul details the need to praise God for the spiritual blessings we have received in Christ. As a result, praise is to be a mark upon us as believers as seen in **1 Pet 2:9 – But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.**

Peter again tells us - **Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3)...**

2. The second thing I want to point out is this. Paul uses the term, "in the heavenly realms" five times in Ephesians and it is not found elsewhere in Scripture. Why is this term so important to the believers in Ephesus and why is it so important for us today? The believers that were living in Asia Minor at the time of this letter had to deal with ongoing spiritual warfare. Many cults believed that in order to appease their god they had to go through the 'heavenly places' to find their good luck and fortune. The work of appeasing their god often involved sacrifice, cutting, blood and sexual indecency.

People were getting saved out of a spiritual quagmire of beliefs and practices, much of which was steeped in demonic influence. Paul is trying to tell us as believers, past and present, that our God is over all the schemes and strategies of the enemy.

Ephesians reveals that:

Eph 1:3 – we are “blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ”.

Eph 1:20 - which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

Eph 2:6 - And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus...

Eph 3:10 - His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms...

Eph 6:12 - For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

The significance of this understanding has great blessing to our lives personally and corporately. There are times and seasons when we can echo the words of the Psalmist – “**why are you downcast oh my soul**” or we find life and circumstance beyond our ability to understand or resolve. Often times the enemy will seek to bring discouragement upon our lives. It is in these times that we can take great courage in this truth. We are blessed in Christ who is seated far above all the schemes and strategies that the enemy throws at us. In addition we are personally seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. Corporately, we are to make known the wisdom of God – Jesus – in the heavenly realms by making sure we stand in Christ knowing that our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the devil and his demons.

In Conclusion:

This was an introductory message to the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians. We are being changed into the likeness and character of Jesus just as the people in Ephesus were being transformed, believer and unbeliever alike. This affects us both individually and as a congregation. Today many prophetic voices are speaking of the church experiencing a spiritual metamorphosis. To some degree we are not sure what to expect, and yet we can learn great lessons from the Scriptures and how other people and congregations were changed. My plan is to help us

discover the secrets of this transformation as we study Ephesians. Today my hope is to help us
bring the praise to God that he deserves even in the midst of life conflicts and challenges.