

February 22, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

To the Praise of His Glory

Ephesians 1:1-6

Several years ago my wife and I and our family were up at Faith Mission Conference Center in White Rock, at a family camp that we had attended for several summers, and we heard a speaker there by the name of Keith Daniels. There were many things I heard that impacted my heart at those services, but I was struck most by a little phrase he would utter, over and over as he spoke whenever he read a passage of Scripture that was particularly impacting to his soul: 'I am staggered by this'. It was a little annoying to me at first because I wasn't staggered by what he read. He seemed to be a bit melodramatic and I wasn't connecting. But as the Spirit of God began to work in my heart over the course of those services, I began to be impacted by the word of God. I began to be staggered by the majesty of God; I was staggered by His love for me; I was staggered by the implications of His word in my life; I was staggered by His grace. I realized that I had been immersed in selfish and trivial pursuits; that my heart had been slowly sealed against the soul-staggering infinite grandeur that is God; and had almost lost the capacity to be intellectually and emotionally staggered by the everlasting, unchanging sovereignty, holiness, wrath, justice, wisdom, truth, and mercy of God. But God in His mercy saw fit to drive the arrow of His word into my soul and change things.

This morning my prayer for us is that we would truly be staggered by this life-changing, soul-saving, darkness-defeating, glory-producing word of God. I pray that this is not just another sermon in a series on the heart of the gospel to you. I pray that the word would shake us up, cause us to tremble, with fear and rejoicing. I pray that our posture would be what Isaiah said it should be when we are under the hearing of His word: ***"This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at My word."*** Isaiah 66:2 I pray that the message of the gospel so impacts our lives that we would live daily in the good of the gospel – that we would delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people.

Because this is the message of Ephesians – the gospel of Jesus Christ. And the message of the gospel is so profound and so incredibly life-changing that we cannot help but be staggered by its message and its implications for our lives. However, I am afraid that we have relegated the gospel to a mere message of life-enhancement for our benefit. The gospel is not about making bad men better, or making life more comfortable somehow. The gospel is so much more. ***It is intensely God-centered and exclusively God-glorifying.*** No less than three times in the first paragraphs of this letter, Paul makes that clear: ***to the praise of His glorious grace***, in verse 6; ***to the praise of His glory*** in verse 12; ***to the praise of His glory*** in verse 14.

Everything God has done, is doing and will do is to the praise of His glorious name. Over and over in Scripture we read things like: ***He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.*** Psalm 23:3 Or ***Nevertheless He saved them for the sake of His name, That He might make His power known.*** Psalm 106:8 or ***through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake,*** Romans 1:5 God always acts for the sake of His name – ***which is another way of saying He acts for His own glory.*** His great goal is to magnify His fame and renown and honor of His name in all that He does.

And what we should understand from this is that this is the most loving thing that God could ever do: because the greatest benefit we humans could ever receive is to share in the glory of God through the gospel. So when God aims to do everything to the praise of His glory; when He works to make His name known and praised and honored and enjoyed in every people, every tribe and nation and tongue, He is acting in absolute love and mercy and grace because His glory alone will satisfy every longing, fulfill every desire, and meet every need of every man, woman or child He has made – for His glory.

I want you to understand that the gospel is unalterably God-centered – not man-centered. Let us look at some of the wording Paul uses here. ***Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:*** Ephesians 1:1 First of all, Paul's occupation is all about God – not Paul. He is an apostle – ***by the will of God.***

Not by the will of Paul. Paul didn't sit down one day and decide - 'I know, I'll be an apostle'. God took hold of him and said - 'Paul, I want you to be an apostle.' This has great implications for our choices in our work and careers. Have you ever considered your job as being by the will of God? Or did you just decide to do what you do because you could make a lot of money or some other reason? Did it ever enter your head that the sovereign God has a hand in what you are doing? More importantly, do you realize that anything not done to the praise of His glory is worthless? We must understand that it is by the will of God that we live and breathe and have our being.

And then he says that the saints in Ephesus are *faithful in Christ Jesus*. **What that implies is that in and of themselves they are not faithful.** Left to ourselves, we prove to be faithless – not faithful. The Bible says *If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself*. 2 Timothy 2:13 **That is who He is – faithful.** And when we are in Him through the gospel we are faithful. That is all about Him – not about us. It points to His ability to be faithful, not our ability.

Paul goes on to say that the grace we get and the peace we enjoy comes to us from God: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. Ephesians 1:2 If we only understand grace to be some kind of warm feeling toward us by God or merely some sort of special favor – then we would not necessarily attribute much glory to it. But if we understand that grace is the unmerited power of God toward us, working in us to do in us what we could never do – then His glory begins to shine and praise begins to happen. And then Paul says that all of blessing that comes to us, comes to us through Christ: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*, Ephesians 1:3

If we are not stunned by the good news of the gospel – that in the midst of our rebellion and sin and outright hostility toward God – He loved us and extended His hand to save us, then we might be tempted to think that salvation is all about our choosing God. But verse 4 tells us different: *even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him*. Ephesians 1:4 This is stunning – this is staggering – if we are not blown away by this thought then we do not really understand the depth of our own depravity and our utter inability to produce a single God-ward thought or emotion. The Bible is not downplaying the necessity of our choosing God – but rather emphasizing the fact that He chose us before we ever had a thought of choosing Him – in fact His choosing happened before the foundation of the world. And whether you believe the world is billions of years old or a few thousand – that is still a very long time ago – long ago enough for us to realize that we had no hand in this. **His choosing us means that He gets all the credit and all the glory and our salvation is all to the praise of His glory.**

But if this is not enough to stagger you, consider verse 5: *In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will*, Ephesians 1:5 The difference between God's choosing in verse 4, and His predestinating in verse 5 is that election, or choosing refers to God's freedom in choosing whom He will predestine, which is the goal of election. Election is God's choosing whom He will, and predestination is God's determination that those whom He has chosen will become His sons. Notice, it is *through Jesus Christ* and it is *according to the purpose of His will*. From start to finish it is a work of God and we can take no credit or glory. It is all to the praise of His glory. This is the stunning good news of the gospel. As verse 6 says, it is all *to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved*. Ephesians 1:6

I trust your hearts have been impacted by this single thought – the gospel of Jesus Christ **is intensely God-centered and exclusively God-glorifying**. When we think about the gospel, when we talk about the gospel, we need to have this in view. Men without Christ are dead – the first verse of chapter two in Ephesians tells us this. They are not bad men waiting to be good – they are not sickly or in a morally weakened state – they are not mostly dead – with a small spark of life – they are dead, dead. Flatlined. Dead with respect to God. And yet at the same time very much alive with respect to sin and self and the world – loving darkness, not light – hating God and hostile to Him.

Before Christ came to you in the gospel, you were not seeking Him – you could care less about Him. And it wasn't as though you were in any sense neutral toward God. The Bible tells us that unregenerate men hate God and are actively hostile to Him. There are those who would argue and say that although they are not followers of Christ they love God. But the god they love is the god they have made in their own image – not the God who made them. And yet it was men and women and children like this that before the foundation of the world God chose, or elected to save and predestined them for sonship – in the Beloved. I don't know about you, but that thought just staggers me. Before creation, God was at work choosing sinners like you and me – selecting us to be saved by His grace through faith in His Son. That must compel praise from those who are redeemed.

So I've said all of that to show that the gospel *is intensely God-centered and exclusively God-glorifying*. Which brings us to the matter of whom God chooses or elects to save because it is obvious that not all are saved, therefore not all are chosen. There are many stunning thoughts in these first six verses but this is the one that generates the most controversy, and I would say, the most anxiety. This is really in the deep end of the theological pool and I wouldn't go right to the doctrine of election when you are preaching the gospel to your neighbor. But this is right at the core of the gospel and we need to allow ourselves to be staggered by this. The fact that verse 4 tells us that we did not choose Him, He chose us gets right to the heart of the debate over man's free will versus God's absolute sovereignty. Or to put it another way – how do we reconcile divine sovereignty with human responsibility?

Because just as the Bible teaches that God chose us before we had a choice to make – it also teaches that whosoever will may come. What it does not teach is either all the responsibility is ours to choose – or that all the responsibility is God's and we must do nothing. **The Bible teaches that God chooses, and we must choose.** This is a theme that runs all the way through the Bible and our time today is not sufficient to cover this aspect in depth. Just know, that by stressing the sovereignty of God this morning I am not absolving anyone from the responsibility to respond to the gospel and be saved.

I want our hearts to be staggered this morning by the beauty and immensity of the sovereignty of God in salvation and that begins with the thought that our transition from death to life, from objects of wrath to objects of mercy was exclusively and entirely an act of sovereign grace. Spurgeon once wrote: *'I believe the doctrine of election, because I am quite certain that, if God had not chosen me, I should never have chosen Him; and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards; and He must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for never could find any reason in myself, why he should have looked upon me with special love.'*

But one of the biggest objections to this doctrine comes from those who say, 'This is the worst thing I have ever heard. This sounds like God is intentionally turning away people who would otherwise be saved, choosing to save some and send others to hell.' But that is simply a misunderstanding of the real situation. These people assume that God is standing at the door of heaven, and people are lining up to get in, and God is picking out certain ones to come in and turning others away. **The truth is – no one is lining up to get into heaven.** Without exception, those without Christ hate God and wouldn't want to be there if they did get in, let alone know what do when they got there. God is standing at the door of heaven, but men are running as hard as they can in the other direction. And so the election of God is that He graciously reaches out and stops this one and that one in their headlong pursuit of hell, choosing them and changing their hearts so that they are willing to choose Him. Someone once said that election keeps no one out of heaven who would have otherwise been there – but keeps a multitude of sinners out of hell that otherwise would have been there. If not for the choosing of God, heaven would be empty and hell bursting at the seams.

J.I Packer wrote that *'When [Paul] introduces election into his teaching – it is for one end only – it is to help Christians see how great is the grace that has saved them, and to move them to a worthy response in worship and life.'* And that is why we have camped here this morning. I believe it is only when we are stunned and staggered by the truth of the gospel – that it *is intensely God-centered and exclusively God-glorifying*, that we can respond in true humility and gratefulness to God; that our hearts are supremely assured of His love and grace to us; that we can make it our desire to be glad in God truly live to make others glad in Him. What this kind of staggering truth does, when its light breaks on our understanding, is inspire our hearts in love and worship.

First of all we fall to our knees in humble worship. In 1 Corinthians 1:26-30, Paul says that God chose so that we can't boast. Not even a little bit. Election leaves no room for any self-congratulation or self-admiration. Even to repent is a work of God. God leads us to repentance by His kindness. Philip Ryken, in the *Message of Salvation* writes: *'Repentance is not a special method for saving ourselves. It is a way of admitting that we cannot save ourselves at all.'* This is the realization the disciples had in Matthew 19 when Jesus told them how difficult it was for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Their response was – 'Who then can be saved'? And the answer is no one – unless God intervenes. *'With men this is impossible – but with God all things are possible'*. Matthew 19:26b

It also inspires our hearts to swell in grateful worship. We could do nothing – God has done everything. We were enemies – He made us His friends. We were profoundly sinful and headed for hell – He chose us for holiness and heaven. As you read this first chapter in Ephesians, you begin to realize that Paul is not standing at the podium lecturing – he is kneeling at the cross, lost in grateful worship of a God who is sovereign and holy and majestic, and whose plan of salvation staggers the imagination. And you begin to see that he is not penning theology so much as he is pouring out his heart in praise of God's glorious grace. It is a realization of the depravity of our natural state and the glorious grace of God's redeeming love. It is not until we have tasted the bitterness of our utter sinfulness that we begin to savor the sweetness of Christ and our hearts swell in grateful worship.

It also grants us confident worship with the rock-solid assurance of salvation and of God's love to us. The mere fact that we are God-conscious and our hearts have been fired with His love and our desires are being drawn heaven-ward tells us that we are those predestined to adoption as sons in to the family of God.

Finally, it inspires glad worship. By that I mean to say that the sovereignty of God in election builds our faith and fuels missions. It says to those who have been made glad in God – 'It is His power that has saved you and made you glad – now go and make others glad in Him'. When we realize that the purpose of God in election is absolutely sure and cannot fail – that according to His sovereign will He has chosen people from every people and tribe and nation and tongue, and His will cannot be thwarted – we can confidently advance the cause of Christ in the world in every place. Knowing that He has chosen a moment in time for each of those to respond to the gospel and embrace the Son means that we can go out into the world full of faith because the gospel is the power of God, and the triumph of His cause was assured before the foundation of the world.

So what application can we make here? First of all if you feel for the first time a stirring in your heart toward God, a sense of your own sinfulness and the desperate need for cleansing, for reconciliation with the God who made you. If you have tasted the bitterness of sin and long for the sweet taste of grace in your life – if you know at this moment you are lost without Christ and need a Savior – then today is the day of salvation for you, and I want to invite you to come to the cross where Christ has made an end of sin and opened the gates of heaven for you.

If on the other hand you have responded to the gospel and tasted the sweetness of His grace, but have found your sensitivity toward the mercy and blessings of God dulled, if your heart like mine, has been slowly sealed and closed to the staggering sovereignty, holiness, wrath, justice, wisdom, truth, and mercy of God – I would invite you to come to the cross for repentance, for healing, for renewing your soul to the praise of His glory.

Our gracious God and Savior,

Thank You for the wonderful truth in Your word. Lord we come this morning, just as we are – with no pretense or covering up. You died for people like us and we are thankful. We couldn't do anything to make ourselves acceptable in Your sight, and so we won't even try to pretend. O Lord, purify our consciences this morning with Your precious blood so that we may worship You and give You glory as we ought. For those still in darkness, may Your word be a brilliant light – may it loose the chains that bind them – let it set captives free – let it bind up the wounded and lift the broken-hearted. Let the mighty cleansing blood of Christ cleanse us, renew us, revive us O Lord. Teach us the bitterness of sin so that we might savor the sweetness of grace. As much as it lies within us, we humble ourselves under the shadow of the mighty cross and under Your mighty hand. Have mercy on us in our battle with pride and help us put to death all that is arrogant and self-exalting in our lives. Show us our utter helplessness without You, and the sweetness of Your undeserved mercy. Grant us to walk in meekness and humility of spirit, and to proclaim and make known the excellencies and greatness of Christ, to the praise of Your glory, we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

**May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.**