

THE PLOT OF THE STORY UNVEILED

SERIES: FINDING YOUR PLACE IN THE STORY

By Danny Hall

As I mentioned in a previous message, my wife is back in South Carolina helping her parents. Her father is in the late stages of Alzheimer's and is still being cared for at home by her mother, who herself just had open-heart surgery two weeks ago. So Ginger is there to help for five weeks. I wanted to go and help, too, so I flew to South Carolina last Sunday and came back Friday. I was going to spend some time with Ginger, encourage her family, and get a lot of work done around the house.

It was going to be quite a compressed trip, so I took the red-eye out of San Jose. I was thinking, "I've really got to be ready to go when I get there, so I've got to get some sleep on this plane, because that will be it until tomorrow night."

I got on the plane, and here came a lady with a three-year-old and a baby who sat down behind me. Sitting next to me was a pretty large guy who needed more room than economy seats offer. I couldn't wait to kick back and get a couple hours of sleep, but he was wound up and he kept wanting to talk. At least there was an empty seat between us. But as the door was about to close a woman got on, and it turned out that was her seat. With the large guy spilling over into her seat and acting a bit hyper, the baby behind us crying, and the three-year-old squirming around and kicking the backs of our seats, she said to me, "It can't get much worse than this, can it?"

As it turned out, the children ended up sleeping through the whole flight. It was just great; we all got some sleep. But as I sat there trying to figure out how I was going to get my sleep, what was going through my mind was, “I can’t believe I’m next to this guy who has to talk all the time, and I can’t believe I’ve got two little children behind me!” It dawned on me that I was calculating my relationships with each of these people so it had the least impact on my ability to sleep. I thought, “Am I always managing the distance between me and other people so that I can control those relationships in order to protect what I want out of the experience?”

One of the interesting things about human beings is that we’re basically relational creatures, but the way we relate to people is skewed because of issues that we’re well aware of, so our whole social life is rather chaotic. What will it take for us to heal and move forward in our relationships?

I would suggest to you that one of the primary things that the gospel of Christ does is talk to us about our relationships. The passage of Scripture we’re going to look at in this message deals with that subject. We’re studying the book of Ephesians and talking about what it means to be the people of God. This passage is a long one, and we’re going to take a panoramic view of it without getting into very much detail. But I want you to grasp what God is doing in your life and in our church. How does the gospel change the way we see our relationships, even our purpose for being here?

In the last message (Discovery Paper 4982) we looked at Ephesians 2:1-10, where Paul talked about God's transforming grace in our lives, how he saved us out of the darkness and bondage of our sinfulness and brought us into a new place. It was totally at his initiative, totally by his grace. And his gracious, transforming work in us prepares us to be actively involved in what he is doing. Verse 10 told us that he has prepared good works for us to live out.

Now in 2:11-3:13 Paul is going to talk in a little more detail about the broad scope of what God is doing in our world and how we fit into that.

Brought near through Christ

Let's read 2:11-13:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

Paul is addressing a group of churches in an area of the world that is part of western Turkey today. The people in these congregations were primarily Gentiles (although there were probably a few Jewish believers). In this passage Paul is making the main argument of the whole book. He talks about what God is doing in building his people. The first step, he says, is to bring near those who were excluded.

Now, when God was going to rescue the world, he chose out a people for himself, the nation of Israel, and he revealed himself to them through his law and through his presence among them. He wanted them to be a light to the nations, to draw people to him for forgiveness and healing and restoration. But that didn't work out so well. Rather than being a light to the world, God's people became very self-focused and exclusive of others. They erected walls that kept out others who needed to hear the redemptive word of God.

Here in verses 11-13 Paul is simply describing that situation. "You were denied access to the beautiful revelation of who God was." He continues, "But in Christ you have been brought near." Part of what Christ does is reach out to those who have been excluded and draw them close.

Now, who are the excluded people in our time? The parallel would be all those who are outside of faith in Christ at this point, outside of a full understanding of what God wants to give them through the love of Christ. We, like Israel, have been entrusted with the message of grace, but we have not invited them in. They feel excluded. How many people would feel welcome if they were to walk into our church without much knowledge of what we're about? Would we invite

them in, include them in the exploration that we do together of the greatness of who God is, or would we look at them differently, make them feel like outsiders somehow?

It's one of the great indictments of who we are as the people of God that there are people who truly do not feel welcome among us. As the nation of Israel did, we have become self-absorbed. We naturally tend to calculate our own safety in terms of keeping people who are different from us, people we don't understand, at a comfortable distance. So we have made people feel excluded. But Paul's message is that God is doing something great, and through the work of Christ he begins by bringing close those who have been excluded.

In the second paragraph he takes it a step farther. God is bringing close those who have been excluded by breaking down every barrier that separates people from him and from each other.

Christ is our peace

Verses 14-18:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their

hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

In this beautiful paragraph Paul describes the way God has torn down the barrier. And what was the barrier that kept out the non-Jew in Paul's day? It was the law. Though the law was designed by God to be a revelation of the greatness of who he was, and was righteous and holy and precious, it was made into a wall by the nation of Israel. They basically said, "We are God's people, and we are superior because we have the law." They kept everybody else out. But when Christ came and fulfilled all that the law pointed to, he broke down that barrier.

Now, the truth is, as human beings we're constantly erecting barriers, and we do that in the church as well. Perhaps the reason that some people, or even many, feel excluded from the fellowship of our church is that we take what we believe, and the out-workings of that, and erect barriers of self-righteousness and judgment. So people don't feel as if they can come into our fellowship to see the wonder of who Christ is. In our own insecure need to feel better than everybody else, we are sometimes mean-spirited. Our rhetoric can be very pointed. The way we present ourselves to the world erects enormous barriers between us who know the gospel and other people.

But just as God did in the nation of Israel, he wants to tear those barriers down. He doesn't want us to see ourselves as morally superior, to insist that we're right and they're wrong, to draw a circle that we're in and they're not. God wants to demonstrate a new way to think and live that

will tear down the barriers that separate others from us. Paul says, “He preached peace to you who were far away,” and then he adds, “and peace to those who were near.” What that means is simply that we all need the same thing: Christ. We who are believers in Christ and part of this church ought to guard our hearts every day so that we don’t become self-righteous and think that somehow we’ve arrived. No, we are still in need of God’s grace, still being transformed by his presence in our lives. We shouldn’t feel superior, but rather humble and vulnerable; and having come to see our deep need for Christ’s transformation, we can embrace those around us who share in that deep need.

At the end of this paragraph Paul says, “Through him we both [Jew and Gentile] have access to the Father by one Spirit.” The presence of the Spirit in our life becomes the true marker of the people of God. The marker is not that we go to the right church, or that we have the truth. It’s that God is present in us through his transforming grace, with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Jews held that they were special and better than those around them because they possessed the law, and we too sometimes regard ourselves as morally superior, when in fact the only things that mark us out as the people of God are the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and our response to God in faith. These are freely available to everyone, no matter where they come from, no matter who they are.

We are the dwelling of God

Then finally in verses 19-22 Paul says:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

In this wonderful paragraph Paul mixes all his metaphors. In fact, although some scholars have doubted whether Paul was the author of the book of Ephesians, one scholar said this paragraph proves he was, because nobody can mix metaphors the way Paul does.

He starts out with our citizenship. Paul was a Roman citizen, and at times it was helpful to him to claim that. He says our citizenship is in the kingdom of God. We're fellow citizens together.

Then he switches to the metaphor of the family, and says we're members of God's household, all part of the same family, Jew and Gentile alike, male and female, poor and rich. All those barriers are destroyed in Christ because we're part of the same family.

Then he switches to the metaphor of the temple and says we're being built together with Christ as the cornerstone, and the prophets and the apostles as the foundations. We're being built into the spiritual house where God dwells and manifests himself by his Spirit.

Now, when we talk about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us as followers of Christ, we've emphasized, and rightly so, that the Spirit lives within each of us individually, giving us the strength and the resources we need to follow Christ. The Holy Spirit mediates our personal relationship with God. It's a beautiful and wonderful truth. But Paul intimates here that something even greater is going on. In some mysterious way the Holy Spirit is in us collectively as the body of Christ. As we are built up into this holy temple, God manifests himself in all of us together.

In 3:1-9, which we're not going to read here, Paul basically says that the great mystery that has been kept secret for so long is that God intended all along to build one great worldwide family. He says he is especially thankful that he has been called to be the proclaimer to the Gentiles of this wonderful thing that God is doing. Verses 10-13 are his summation of all this.

The manifestation of God

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, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Paul says the result of this is that God is making a declaration to the whole cosmos, to all the earth, to every power, to every human structure and system of authority, to cultural manifestations of evil, to the spiritual powers themselves, Satan and all he reigns, across the board. He is making this declaration through the church, declaring his sovereignty, his majesty, and his love.

You see, we were created in the image of God to be relational people. But one of the ways, if not the primary way, that sin manifests itself is by fracturing our relationships, by building self-protective comfort zones, which we in American culture are so adept at. The gospel says God is reaching down and restoring our relationship with him, and then manifesting that in restoring relationships horizontally with each other. That's why Paul will spend so much time in the latter half of this book talking about relationships.

Look ahead for a moment. In chapter 5 he talks about what marriage is about, about what a husband should do and what a wife should do. Now, I'm sure that Paul wants you to have a good marriage. But that's not why he's teaching that. That might be a great byproduct of his teaching. What Paul is really saying is that in a world that has gone crazy, what if two people so mutually gave themselves to one another that they lived selflessly and sacrificially for each other's good, and presented to the world a picture of the union of two human beings at the most intimate level possible, in absolute, unconditional love for one another? That would declare to the world the greatness of the transforming grace of God and picture the intimacy with God that we can have.

Look at chapter 4 where Paul talks about spiritual gifts. In a world that's all about self and what's in it for me and my achievements, he presents the picture of the body of Christ as a collection of people with different spiritual gifts who are joined together in serving the Lord, each other, and the world by mutually sharing who they are in the unique ways that God has crafted them. I have a set of gifts and a personality, and I bring it to this church, and you have a set of gifts and a personality that you bring, and I'm enriched by who you are, and you're enriched by who I am. What would happen in our world, where it's all about who's on top, if there was a picture of a group of people in which the ones who come in week after week and just straighten out the hymnbooks and make sure all the pew cards and envelopes are ready for Sunday morning, are valued just as highly as the person who stands up in front on Sunday and speaks? That would declare to the world the transforming grace of God.

In a time when high school kids are ever more alienated from adults, what would happen if the world could see high school kids and senior adults sitting down at the same table, trying to understand each other and valuing each other?

You see, God wants to demonstrate to the whole world that he is the sovereign Lord, gracious and loving and merciful and holy, and he says, "I'm doing this through my church."

Paul goes on to say that this gives us boldness. Through faith in God, we may approach him with freedom and confidence. We know we're a part of a great and incredible movement of God to declare his glory to the whole earth, and he's rescued us out of our own sinfulness and set us free

to be a part of what he's doing, a part of his church. We ought to be so fired up about that that we're confident, that we go straight to the Lord in prayer. We have open access to him.

We also ought to have hope. He says to them, "Don't worry because I'm in jail for my faith. That's to your glory. Why? I'm out preaching the kingdom of God and living for Christ! I'm proclaiming that Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not. And that's the very message that is transforming your lives! So who cares if I go to jail?"

God wants to declare to the world the greatness of who he is by the demonstration of Christ among us, breaking down barriers, uniting us. And why does this matter? God created us in his image, and a major part of that is being relational. Sin has marred our ability to relate selflessly. It's the root of war, of conflict, of divisions in our homes, our cities, our communities, our churches. But God wants to demonstrate his rescuing power by transforming people into his image and restoring our relational integrity.

Our church is involved with a lot of great people around the world who are serving Christ. Two of those are Todd and Karla Poulter. They're doing sensitive work in a certain part of our world, but Todd gave me permission to share this story. Part of what he's doing is trying to bring people from a variety of church backgrounds together, to reach a certain part of the world by proclaiming Christ and by translating the Scriptures into the various languages. He's trying to help people trust one another and work together. He recently had a conference, and this is what he said about it in his prayer letter:

“But there is one more intangible outcome of this conference that may have more influence than anything else in supporting the fulfillment of these specific initiatives: a demonstrable spirit of unity among those who came from over 50 countries and all share a concern for the least-reached, forgotten fourth of the world’s people. Leaders from regions of the world that are commonly left out of the planning and decision-making for such events said, ‘We have seen that our input is valued and that we’re part of the leadership of this movement.’ Others whose first language isn’t English addressed the plenary sessions in their mother tongue, rather than in a language they weren’t comfortable speaking. In the words of the conference brochure, we became ‘family’ as we explored multiple ways to collaborate together in ministry. All this wasn’t lost on the hotel manager, who spoke during the closing ceremony: ‘This hotel has hosted hundreds of conferences, but I have never seen a group like yourselves who have such a spirit of love and joy as I see you interacting together.’”

This is the Spirit of God transforming lives!

We could talk at length about how this applies to us. We have generational issues as young and old try to learn how to listen to each other and get along with each other, how to worship together, how to work and serve together. We have arguments about worship and worship styles. The fragmentation of society appears even in the way that we organize ourselves as a church into subgroups. But at the end of the day we have to come back to this: How are we going to go forward? How are we going to be the church as Paul describes here? In 3:7-8 Paul says:

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ....

The conclusion Paul came to was, "I'm a servant of this gospel." If you and I are to walk forward, it will be out of a heart of humility and submission to the lordship of Christ, a heart that says this isn't about whether I get my way of doing things, or what the church is going to do for me today. God has called me to be part of the body of Christ, to proclaim the gospel of Christ, and I am going to be a servant of this gospel. That's what will move us toward the place where God wants us to be.

So my prayer for us all is that we will move out of the mindset of what's in it for us, and ask God how we can contribute, how we can engage with the body of Christ, and through the body of Christ reach this needy world to his glory, to declare his greatness.

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Ephesians 2:11-3:13

Fourth Message

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