



A CHURCH FORMED: TO THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY

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It's not easy being you. You have expectations for yourself that you often fail to meet, and you sometimes beat yourself up because of it. If people knew how hard you were on yourself, they'd go a little easier on you. Deep down, you believe there's something special about you. Once in a while, others notice it and affirm you, and you feel great about yourself for a moment, but the moment fades and you're left waiting for another moment. No, it's not easy being you.

It's not easy being me, for some of the same reasons, I fathom, that it's not easy being you. It can be difficult to live with others, of course, but it can be even more difficult to live with ourselves. Each of us carries a burden: the burden of the self. Not an easy load, that. How can we bear it? Let's turn to Ephesians, the second of the three Pauline letters under consideration for *EPIC*. What does Ephesians say about you? More importantly, what does it say about God that might help you?

The unification of all things

In Ephesians 1:3, Paul says,

³Praise 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.

Then, in verses 4-14, he recounts the blessings while telling the story of what God has done in Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah. Both the story and the blessings reach a climax.

Ephesians 1:8b-10:

^{8b}With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

God wills many things, of course. But if we were to gather everything that God wills into one statement, we could not do better than Paul in these verses. God's will, now revealed, is "to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."

God wills to unite everything in the universe in Christ. The fact that everything needs to be united implies a certain prior alienation. Indeed, when sin entered the world, everything "in heaven and on earth," was affected. Even some things in heaven, in the unseen realm, are alienated from God, namely demonic beings. Furthermore, there is a breach between heaven and earth, and God means to repair that breach in Christ.

When sin entered the world, both humans and creation were affected. Creation was subjected to frustration and became enslaved to decay (Romans 8:20-21), and humans became alienated from God and from each other (Genesis 3-4). Everything became disconnected, out of joint, and out of whack. Perhaps your life feels that way, with everything flying out of control, with no clear center to integrate the disparate parts. Christ is not only the means of bringing all things together, he is also the focal point of those things.

God has made known to us the mystery of his will, and he has "purposed in Christ" to implement his will "when the times reach their fulfillment." When would those times be? Clearly, according to the New Testament, God has not only revealed his will to unite all things in Christ, he has also put it into effect through the death, resurrection, and ascension/enthronement of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The times have reached their fulfillment. Then again, just as clearly, according to the New Testament, the times have not yet reached their fulfillment. Although the age to come has broken into this world in the person of the Holy Spirit, there is still, to be sure, an age to come (Ephesians 1:21). We live, then, between the times, in the overlap of the ages, between the inauguration and consummation of the kingdom of God, in the now and the not yet.

Camping tents these days are supported by collapsible poles, which are united by elastic "shock cords" that run through the cylindrical sections. When handled in a certain manner, the shock cord causes all the sections to snap into line, forming one sturdy pole capable of fulfilling its purpose—supporting a tent. Christ is like that shock cord. He unites the disparate parts of a fragmented universe so that they may fulfill their purpose to glorify God. History is moving toward the day when all creation will be united in him.

Consider God's plans

Consider the nature of the problem: broken humans, a broken world, and a broken universe. We cannot fix things. In fact, many of our attempts to fix things only make them worse. But God has “made known” something to us: his plans for a new humanity, a new world, and a new universe. The architect has shown us his plans, so to speak, and the builders have even broken ground, but the structure is not yet complete. Especially in light of the problem, consider God's plans to unite everything in the universe under Christ and to repair the breach between heaven and earth. The plans are breathtaking. Based the way God has blessed us in Christ, culminating in the uniting of all things under Christ, Paul leads us into worship. He begins by praising God and then observes, on three more occasions, that the blessings in Christ by necessity result in the praise of God's glory or in the praise of his glorious grace.

Take some time to consider the nature of the problem. Take some time to consider God's plans. Consider the problem, consider the plans—and praise God.

What has God done, and what is he currently doing, to bring to unity all things under Christ? In large measure, the letter to the Ephesians answers such questions. The central message of Ephesians concerns cosmic and human reconciliation and unity in Christ.

The heavenly realm

What has God done in the heavenly realm? He has defeated demonic beings who oppose his purposes: “he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:20-21).

What is God currently doing in the heavenly realm? Yes, demonic beings have been defeated in the death, resurrection, and ascension/enthronement of Jesus Christ, but they have not been destroyed: the kingdom has been inaugurated but not yet consummated. Though limited, demons can still influence humanity, like the first humans, to rebel against God. Therefore, Paul commands the Ephesians and, by extension, us:

Ephesians 6:10-13:

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹²For 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. ¹³Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

Embracing reality

Those of us who believe in Christ and praise God can still be influenced by the dark powers; therefore, we must put on spiritual armor, which begins with embracing the biblical version of reality instead of alternative versions, in order to participate in the consummation of the kingdom of God. The Scriptures speak truth about God, ourselves, and our world, but the demons speak falsehood, seeking to corrupt individuals and entire cultures. They make what's true appear to be false, and they make what's false appear to be true so that what's wrong seems right and what's right seems wrong. Terrorists by and large believe they are acting in behalf of oppressed peoples.

Demonic forces are behind “every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God” (2 Corinthians 10:5). They want to convince us to be independent of God and to, in essence, take the place of God. Our enemy's goal is to lead us away from “sincere and pure devotion to Christ” and lead us into a complicated and impure devotion to ourselves and our self-determined or culturally determined causes (1 Corinthians 11:3).

In our culture, independence from God often expresses itself in either self-condemnation or self-glorification. Some people beat themselves up; other people puff themselves up. Some people tend to do both, beating themselves up one moment and puffing themselves up the next. In any case, who God is and what he says is either ignored or misinterpreted.

Jeff Burkebile, a San Francisco architect and a follower of Jesus, writes of his tendency toward self-condemnation:

In my career, family, friendships, and even church community I felt captive to . . . the expectations of others. But worst of all were the expectations I had set for myself and constantly failed to meet. Finding little traction to change these areas for the better, I constantly bumped into limits I seemed unable to alter or even understand.¹

Brennan Manning, a writer and speaker on the spiritual life up until his death on April 12, wrote of his tendency toward self-glorification:

After I delivered a forty-five-minute sermon titled “The Victorious Limp,” the assembled community of 11,000 rose to its feet and erupted into thunderous

*applause. My shadow self that hungers for honor, recognition, power, glory and human respect experienced an instant of gratification. My false self that thrives on illusion that my real identity lies in ministerial success, homiletic triumph, victories in the vineyard, stellar book reviews and the admiration of others basked in the chorus of adulation.*²

The burden of the self

Either way, whether you condemn yourself or glorify yourself, you replace God with yourself. You place the burden of yourself on yourself. This burden of the self, with its vainglorious victories and demoralizing defeats, is so enormous that it cannot be borne by the self. None of us is strong enough to bear the burden of the self. Paul does not say “be strong in yourself and in your mighty power”; no, he says “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.”

How, then, do we “put on the full armor of God”? First, in order to embrace the truth, you must be exposed to the truth, and the truth is in the Scriptures. But it’s not enough to simply be exposed to the truth; the truth must be appropriated. If you simply see the armor, it will be of no benefit to you. You must put it on.

How, then, do you put it on? Putting on the full armor of God begins with where Ephesians began: with praising God for what he has done and will do for us in Christ. This burden of the self can only be borne by God, who is so great that he is unifying all things under Christ, and we find him bearing the burden—putting our victories and defeats into perspective—when we worship him. In worship, we release alternative versions of reality and embrace the biblical version in order to be ready for the spiritual attacks that will inevitably come when we endeavor to bring the healing love of God to the world.

In the heavenly realm, God has defeated the dark powers and helps us resist their influence.

The earthly realm

What has God done in the earthly realm? He has united Jews and Gentiles in Christ. Paul noted, in Ephesians 1:9, that God “made known to us the mystery of his will” to unite all things under Christ. God’s will includes the widespread inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God, for in Ephesians 3 Paul speaks of the “mystery made known to me by revelation”: “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:3-6). In fact, Paul says, God “has made the two groups one” and that “his purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus

making peace” (Ephesians 2:14-15).

What is God currently doing in the earthly realm? That’s what the second half of Paul’s letter, Ephesians 4-6, is mainly about. Paul begins Ephesians 4 with these words, which constitute his theme for the second half of the letter.

Ephesians 4:1-6:

¹As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

On the one hand, Paul appeals to the Ephesians—and to us—to keep the unity that Christ has created. On the other hand, he envisions the church being built up “until we all reach unity in the faith” (Ephesians 4:13). After all, part of God’s purpose is to unify all things under Christ was to unite Jews and Gentiles and, furthermore, to unite all races and all people for the purpose of bringing glory to God. Unity extends not only to relationships across racial lines but also to other relationships that are liable to be fraught with tension: husbands and wives, children and parents, and slaves and masters (Ephesians 5:22-6:9).

What God is doing in the earthly realm to bring people together in the church has a powerful influence on the heavenly realm: “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” (Ephesians 3:10). The “manifold,” or multifaceted, wisdom of God concerns the bringing together of different peoples. The rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm want to foment divisions, and when they see different kinds of people uniting in Christ, and former enemies setting aside hostilities, they get the message—the gospel message—that their time is up.

For Paul, the key to unity is for believers in Christ to appreciate the value of the calling we have received—in other words, to appreciate what God has done for us in Christ, as articulated in Ephesians 1-3. Such appreciation for the value of our calling nurtures humility, which contributes to unity.

True humility

Genuine humility is hard to come by. There is the false humility of the self-condemning sort: people don’t deem themselves capable of much and don’t trust God for much.

There is also the false humility of the self-glorifying sort: people deem themselves capable of much and don't think they need God for much but learn to project humility for effect. True humility is achieved by considering the value of our calling: what God has done for us in Christ.

True humility is achieved by realizing that we are not responsible for our calling. Instead, it is something we have "received" from God. God blessed us; we didn't bless ourselves. Indeed, we cannot bless ourselves. Language itself precludes self-blessing: we speak of being blessed, or we speak of blessing other people, but we don't speak of blessing ourselves. When Sonny, Robert Duvall's character in *The Apostle*, baptizes himself as an apostle of the Lord, we know something is amiss.

We have not blessed ourselves; on the contrary, God has blessed us, and not in a partial way but with every spiritual blessing in Christ, culminating in the final unification of all things.

How, then, do we nurture true humility? First, in order to nurture humility, you must consider, even revel in, the value of your calling. How, then, do you revel in your calling? Reveling in your calling begins, not surprisingly, with where Ephesians began: with praising God for what he has done and will do. In worship, as we stand, or kneel, before the Father who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ, we find no place for pride and every place for humility. Finding every place for humility does not mean, of course, that we pull back because we have nothing to offer; on the contrary, it means that we move forward with more confidence that God has given us everything to offer.

If you want to know what humility looks like, look at the life of Moses, who was called "a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3). Moses, after a searing failure sent him into the wilderness for forty years, finally confronted his fears and learned to place confidence in God. With humility, you can lead a nation.

Encountering God

Brennan Manning didn't bask in the adulation of his audience for long before God put his triumph into perspective. Manning wrote:

In that fleeting moment of euphoria, God took pity on his poor, proud son. Immediately I was given a vision of myself lying in a coffin. The funeral home

had closed, the place was deserted. My embalmed body was lying in the coffin completely alone. I had run out of time.³

Jeff Burkebile, the San Francisco architect, is learning to deal with his self-condemning ways through worship—more particularly, through the practice of spiritual disciplines.

Both Brennan Manning and Jeff Burkebile encountered God, and that's what we do in worship, especially the kind that praises God. When we worship God, when we revel in him, in his attributes, in what he has done, is doing, and will do for us, both in heaven and on earth, we embrace reality and nurture humility.

Left to myself, because of my insecurities, I would ping-pong forever between self-condemnation and self-glorification. Some years ago I realized that writing sermonic commentaries, which I use to form preaching outlines, is a spiritual discipline. It's a form of worship. As I string together words in my attempt to explain, apply, and illustrate the biblical text, I encounter God. I reach for words, into the depths of my mind and into the vastness of heaven. Once in a while, I find those words. When I do, time stands still and the angels start singing. I break forth in praise, if only in my mind (especially if I'm working in a public place, such as a café.) I lose myself. Or maybe I find myself. Thank God for worship! To the praise of his glory.

It's not easy being you. It's not easy being me. When we praise God, we find that he bears the burden of ourselves.

NOTES:

¹Jeff Burkebile, "Renovation of My Heart" (*Conversations*, Fall/Winter 2012), 29.

²Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus* (Portland: Multnomah, 1992), 188.

³Manning, 188.