

Recall & React: Always Read the Intro

Ephesians 1:1-2

Imagine for a moment that you get invited to a prestigious state dinner at the White House. You've never been to something like this before and so leading up to the event your mind is very much focused on what you will wear, and you try to imagine what it will be like to rub elbows with so many famous and influential people.

About a week before the dinner you receive a letter from the White House outlining the events for the evening and you suddenly realize why you have been invited. Your long-time friend will be receiving an important award and you have been invited to give his introduction before he gives the keynote speech. After your panic attack you start to pull yourself together and sit down to figure out what in the world you will say and how you will introduce your friend.

You begin to wonder, what makes a good introduction? What do I need to tell people to get them interested and ready to hear my friend speak? I don't want to speak too long because this is just an introduction, but I don't want to seem unprepared and as if I don't really care.

There's a certain art form to giving a good introduction. This is true when you are introducing another speaker and when you are writing a letter, essay or even a book. You may not realize it, but the Apostle Paul was a master at introducing his letters, and I would venture to guess that most of us simply skip over the details of his introductions to get to the "meat" of what he said.

Paul is a master of the introduction because he uses a very similar structure for each of his introductions. He always introduces himself as the author, tells us who the letter is to and then gives a theological greeting. But he creatively tailors them to fit the theme and circumstances of each particular letter. I want to show you this today as we begin the book of Ephesians together and study Paul's introduction of this magnificent letter. This introduction is packed with gospel truths that prepare us for what we will learn in the book. So, turn with me to Ephesians 1:1-2 and we are going to see **4 Gospel Truths that set the stage for God to change us through Ephesians.**

1. **God's Sovereign Plan**

The first Paul does in this introduction is to introduce himself and fit himself within God's sovereign plan for all of creation. Look at the first part of verse 1.

Now, I would imagine most of you are somewhat familiar with the Apostle Paul and his ministry, but here's the basic gist of who he is. He was trained as a Pharisee and was a devout adherent to the law of Moses. So much so that after Jesus died and the Christian church began to reproduce he was one of the leading persecutors of the church even going so far as to arrest and put to death Christians. But all of that changed in dramatic fashion when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and Paul was radically converted to Christianity.

Then, he gave his life to proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and starting churches all over Europe and Asia Minor. That little bit of background is important here because of the way Paul identifies himself as an Apostle in verse 1. Paul wasn't calling himself 1 of the original twelve who were with Jesus during his earthly ministry, but he identifies himself as an apostle as one who had seen the risen Christ and who was sent by God and with the authority of God.

So, Paul is saying that he is a messenger of Christ Jesus, but that as a messenger he has been fully authorized to deliver the message of the king. That's why he also says in verse 1 that he is an apostle by the will of God.

In other words, God called Paul into this. Paul wasn't ultimately in the driver's seat. It was God's will that he proclaims the gospel. Listen to how Paul explains his calling and ministry in Ephesians 3:7-11.

In other words, Paul's life fit into the will of God for the entire universe. He played a role in the work God was and is doing. Paul understood that his life was not his own and that God's purposes are big and broad. Listen to how Paul connects God's will and his purposes in 1:11. God is the master architect who by his sovereign will and plan will see His purposes accomplished.

Let me ask you if you have Paul's perspective on your life? Do you understand that your life is not your own? Our culture bombards us with the notion that your life is your sole possession. "It's up to you how you live your life." "Don't tell me what to do with my body."

It's my prayer that the book of Ephesians will teach us to have Paul's perspective. You have life and breathe because of the will of God and your life ultimately belongs to Him and you are accountable to Him. That's our first gospel truth.

2. Believers Holy Position

Next, Paul tells us who he is writing to in the rest of verse 1. Look there.

We learn here that Paul is writing this letter to the church gathered at Ephesus. You can go read much about the church at Ephesus in Acts 19-20 and in Revelation 2. But this letter is unique among Paul's letters because he really doesn't give specific instruction in response to problems happening in Ephesus. This is more of a general letter and he probably intended it to circulate around to other churches as well.

Regardless of who ended up reading this letter, he defines the recipients in a very specific way. He calls them saints. Now of course, we tend to think of saints as those who are exceptionally pious and righteous. But the word is used in the NT to describe every believer and that's because the word means "to set apart." The root here is the same word translated holy in the NT.

The basic idea here is that Christians are set apart, not because of what they have done, but because of what Jesus has done and they are considered holy because they are united to Him. Look at the rest of the phrase. This is probably better translated "believers" rather than "faithful" and the "believers" are the saints. But those who are saints and believers have this standing and position because they are found "in" Christ Jesus.

They are not standing on their own merit and their own righteousness. They are connected to Jesus and share in His standing before the Father. This idea of being united with Christ plays a feature role in the book of Ephesians. Just glance down at verse 3. Every spiritual blessing is ours because we are "in Christ Jesus." We are set apart or saints because we are united to Him. We'll explore this union more in the coming weeks but our holy position is a gospel truth that radically changes us. Let's look at our 3rd gospel truth in this introduction. Look at verse 2.

3. God's Gracious Purpose

These words are so common at the beginning of Paul's letters that easy to become numb to them. But let's consider them for a second. Notice that both grace and peace come to us from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. These two are gifts that flow from God to us. So, is the nature of the gifts we have received in Christ?

Well, grace is the unmerited and undeserved favor and goodness of God that comes to us in salvation and redemption from sin because of Jesus's work. Grace is not stolen, bought, or earned. It is lavishly given without the thought of repayment. It is given to those who are in rebellion against the giver. If grace is God's favor then peace is the goal of God's favor. We tend to think of peace as an inner freedom from turmoil. This peace includes that but it is so much bigger. The Hebrew equivalent to "peace" is shalom and it describes a state of well-being and harmony. It's when things are as they should be. It's what we hope for and anticipate in the future when Jesus reigns over all.

But, what Paul is saying here is that saints and believers in Christ have begun to experience grace and to taste the well-being that comes from God's gift of grace in Christ. But Paul is writing this book of Ephesians so that believers will grow in their experience of grace. He wants each person who picks up this book to understand and experience grace and peace in greater and greater measure through the message of the book. So, how does he propose to do that in these 6 chapters? That's our 4th gospel truth.

4. Ephesians Particular Program

The book of Ephesians basically comes to us in two sections, chapters 1-3 and 4-6. In chapters 1-3 Paul is telling believers who they are and the amazing blessings of being united with Christ. In the midst of these chapters there are two prayers for the recipients that they would grasp the truths of their identity in Christ. Some have called this the doctrine section of the Epistle.

Then in chapters 4-6 he turns to the resulting lifestyle and behaviors that match the reality of our position in Christ. Look at 4:1 for a moment with me. That word "walk" means the lifestyle or pattern of behavior, dispositions, and emotions that flow out of our calling to salvation. Chapters 4-6 comes in 6 sections and five of those sections are governed by the command to walk. Some have called this section the conduct portion of the Epistle.

It's fairly easy to see the way this book is divided up, but I think we need to think very carefully this morning about how these two sections go together. This can get sticky in the Christian life and we can deceive ourselves easily here.

We tend to talk about our doctrine as one thing and our actions as something else that may or may not result from believing the right things. So we tend to draw a wedge between the identity and blessings of chapters 1-3 and the resulting conduct of chapters 4-6. But Paul would not have thought of it that way. Instead, we need to think in terms of the conduct of chapters 4-6 completing the identity of chapters 1-3. In other words, you haven't really taken on the identity of being in Christ until you are functionally living like it.

This is exactly how Paul describes this in chapter 2. Look at 2:1-2. Our walk or lifestyle used to be in the world and defined by the passions of the flesh. But, when God's mercy appeared and we were seated in the heavenly places with Christ, a new identity described in verse 6, part of that new identity is a new walk, described in verse 10. You are a different person and different people walk differently.

It makes little sense to say that I am a hunter unless I have loaded up my rifle and shot a deer. I can read about hunting, I can go to the gun range, and I can fire my gun thousands of times, but I am not a hunter unless I go out in to the woods and shoot something or at least attempt to shoot something.

We can be tempted to think of chapters 4-6 as an optional addition onto the gospel truths of chapters 1-3, but the conduct described here is not optional. Instead, think of it this way.

Paul isn't just giving us ethical commands in chapters 4-6 that are a different way of living. He's also describing the worldview, or context in which the conduct in 4-6 makes sense. The reality of being "in Christ" creates motivation for the behavior. Chapters 4-6 only make sense if the conduct is built on the reality described in chapters 1-3. Let me give you an example of this. Turn to 4:1-6. He is calling us to passionately pursue unity and kindness with one another in the church. That matter of conduct will not make sense to you and you won't see the need for it unless you understand 2:11-19.

If you sheer off chapters 4-6 from the first part of the book you lose the motivational core for walking in a certain way. Paul is trying to retrain our vision of the world and our emotions so that the lifestyle or walk described in 4-6 seems normal and reasonable.

This is why I've tried to summarize the message of the book of Ephesians with the title of this series, Recall & React. In chapters 1-3 Paul is telling us to recall the work of Christ and the amazing blessings that have come to us through Christ and he's building an identity in us so that the appropriate reaction will take place, which he describes in chapters 4-6. Recall & React. The subtitle of the series is "How the Gospel Forms Identity and Behavior in the Book of Ephesians"

My prayer is that our time together in Ephesians will reshape your identity and then your walk in the world. Let's Pray.