

CHOSEN
IN CHRIST





CHOSEN IN CHRIST

THE GLORY OF GRACE
IN EPHESIANS 1

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS



P U B L I S H I N G
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To

CARLYLE (BUD) WILSON
with gratitude for fatherly love,
for brotherly prayers, and for a passion
to see a modern reformation in Christ's church

Ephesians 5:1-2

and to

HIM
in whom we are blessed with
every spiritual blessing in heavenly
places, blessed be his God and Father!

Ephesians 1:3



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PREFACE

There is no greater need today than for people to understand and believe and act upon the message that is found in the apostle Paul's great letter to the Ephesians. Here we are presented with the triune God in all his glory, but especially in his work for the salvation of lost humankind. Ephesians contains the Christian gospel in full orb, saving us from our sin and transforming us into the image of God's holy Son. Anyone who grasps the message of this book will apprehend the Bible's essential teaching on salvation, on the church, and on the Christian life. All Scripture is of course edifying and instructive, but here we climb to the peak of apostolic teaching, the top of the pyramid in which all the main lines come together.

In the preface to his volume on Ephesians 1, written in 1978, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones declared, "Our world is in a state of utter confusion, and, alas, the same is true of the Christian Church and of many individual Christians."¹ How alarming that is to read, since our generation looks back on that time with nostalgia as one of ordered simplicity and comparative virtue! I know of no one who would argue that the world, and Christians with it, is less confused now than then; in the intervening years Western civilization has plunged headlong into a sinful descent, so that confusion not only reigns but is widely celebrated. To the Christian, what is most alarming is the extent to which what is said of the world can be said of the church and of professing Christian people. The most urgent

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need of our time, then, as Lloyd-Jones argued in his, is for us to learn anew what the word *Christian* means. This is the particular subject that the apostle Paul treats with such clarity and richness in the first chapter of Ephesians. In so doing, he not only scatters the clouds of confusion but also shatters them with the light of God's magnificent grace in Christ, inspiring us to live in gratitude to the pleasure and praise of God.

In my view, Lloyd-Jones's expositions on Ephesians set the standard for studies of this great epistle. However, many pastors and laypeople will find his commentary—at eight volumes, each of them quite long—sufficiently daunting so as to let them fall into neglect. My experience is that most of the other resources on Ephesians suffer for being too short. As Lloyd-Jones lamented, briefer treatments want for a thorough consideration of the details, passing by diamonds and gems laid with such care into this, the crown of the great apostle's written achievement. My intention is to strike the wide-open middle ground of this situation, offering a thorough yet accessible exposition of Ephesians to the reader interested in really coming to grips with this most elevated and instructive book of Holy Scripture.

The studies in this volume were first preached at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia from the fall of 2001 to the spring of 2002, as part of a series on the entire Book of Ephesians. I will always be grateful to the session and congregation of Tenth Church for the love and encouragement they provided me during my time of ministry there. I also thank the session and congregation of First Presbyterian Church in Coral Springs/Margate, Florida, where I now serve as senior minister, for their constant love and prayers.

This book is dedicated to Bud Wilson, a man whose life exemplifies the faith and love Paul wants all Christians to offer to God. I am particularly indebted to him for his fervent and loving support of my ministry, in prayer and in deed. I am

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again indebted to my friend Bruce Bell for his invaluable aid in critiquing these chapters. I give praise to God for the faithful support of my wife, Sharon, without which my ministry would lack endurance and joy. Finally, I give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for the superabundance of spiritual blessings he so graciously gives to sinners, “to the praise of his glorious grace.”



1

GRACE AND PEACE
TO YOU

Ephesians 1:1–2

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful
in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from
God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
—Ephesians 1:1–2*

*P*aul’s Epistle to the Ephesians has been celebrated with the highest possible superlatives. Samuel Taylor Coleridge called it “the divinest composition of man.”¹ It has likewise been described as “the crown of St. Paul’s writings” and “the Queen of the Epistles.” John Mackay, former president of Princeton Theological Seminary, described Ephesians as the “greatest,” the “maturest,” and “for our time the most rel-

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evant of all Paul's works. For here is the distilled essence of the Christian religion, the most authoritative and most consummate compendium of our holy Christian faith." Recounting his own conversion through the reading of this letter, Mackay describes his experience: "I saw a new world . . . everything was new . . . I had a new outlook, new experiences, new attitudes to other people. I loved God. Jesus Christ became the center of everything . . . I had been 'quicken'd'; I was really alive."² This aptly describes what Ephesians is all about.

Realizing the profundity of this book may lead some readers to apprehension. In one sense that is all right; we should begin studies of a book of Scripture—especially one described like this—with awe, with a sense that something is going to happen to us through our study. It is the Paul's intention that this should be so, and God's intention through him! But to temper that apprehension, we should realize that though Ephesians is so profound, it is marked by a simple clarity. James Montgomery Boice wrote, when he began preaching this book, "If Ephesians *is* profound, it is so not for the mysterious nature of its unfathomable deep secrets, but for the clear way it presents the most basic Christian truths. . . . What is the appeal of this book? In my judgment it is just this: it presents the basic doctrines of Christianity comprehensively, clearly, practically, and winsomely."³

PAUL, AN APOSTLE

Following the custom of his day, Paul began this letter with his name and office: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus." Paul wrote thirteen biblical books, just under one quarter of the New Testament. Apart from Jesus Christ, it is hard to think of anyone who left so great a mark on the history of the Christian church.

F. F. Bruce began his study of Paul's life by frankly ad-

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mitting his love for the great apostle. He praised Paul for “the attractive warmth of his personality, his intellectual stature, the exhilarating release effected by his gospel of redeeming grace, the dynamism with which he propagated that gospel throughout the world.”⁴ Paul is best known for the depth and coherence of his theological writings, but as Thomas Schreiner reminds us in a recent study, “Paul . . . was first and foremost a missionary . . . who wrote letters to churches in order to sustain his converts in their newfound faith.”⁵

Paul describes himself more simply and quite a bit more humbly than all that: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus.” The word *apostle* means “one who is sent,” or simply, “messenger.” In the New Testament era apostles were missionaries who traveled about preaching the gospel and forming churches. Most importantly—and surely this sense is intended by Paul—apostles bore the authority of Christ in their teaching and rule, an authority granted them by the risen and exalted Lord Jesus. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones defines an apostle as “one chosen and sent with a special mission as the fully authorized representative of the sender.”⁶ P. T. O’Brien writes, “As an apostle he has the authority to proclaim the gospel in both oral and written form, as well as to establish and build up churches.”⁷

The apostles include the original twelve disciples of Jesus, with Matthias added to replace the betrayer Judas Iscariot. Acts 1:22 establishes the qualification that an apostle must be a witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul fulfilled this criterion by means of his conversion experience on the Damascus Road, when he was converted and commissioned by the risen Lord. Paul was not one of the original apostles, but in Galatians 2:1–10 he recounts being received by them after his conversion and accepted by them as an apostle appointed to preach to the Gentiles.

Paul asserts his apostolic authority in all of his writings, presenting his credentials and drawing attention to the offi-

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cial character of his writing. What Jesus said to the Twelve just before his ascension into heaven, in Acts 1:8, equally applies to Paul, “You will receive power . . . you will be my witnesses.” The Christian faith, therefore, is received through the apostolic testimony, which is the exalted Christ’s revelation by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through these delegates. We, like the first recipients, are bound to receive and believe the words of these apostles as the very Word of Christ.

Paul adds that he is an apostle of Christ “by the will of God.” This was not a job Paul had sought and worked toward on his own. He was called by God and equipped by God’s grace. It is on this basis that his teaching is to be received: not because of his own native genius and persuasive power but in submission to God, who appointed him. It is this contrast between divine and human authority that Paul probably means to emphasize here; the opening words of Galatians work this out even more clearly: “Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal. 1:1).

This is the first of four times in Ephesians 1 that Paul speaks of “the will of God.” This directs us right from the start to one of the great themes that runs all through this epistle, namely, the sovereignty of God. The other verses in which this expression appears—Ephesians 1:5, 9, and 11—emphasize God’s sovereignty in our salvation and his eternal purpose to bring all things together under Jesus Christ. This is an important connection, because it tells us that from start to finish the gospel and Christianity are under the sovereign control of God. God sovereignly accomplished our redemption through Jesus Christ; by his own will he sent apostles to preach the gospel of Christ; he sovereignly chose us from before creation to receive that gospel and be saved; and at the time of his choosing he will sovereignly consummate and complete his redemptive plan in Christ to the glory of his name. It is all

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a matter of God's sovereignty; we encounter this in the first verse of the book, just as we will find it standing out in glory all through Ephesians.

AUTHORSHIP AND DESTINATION

Scholars have posed two questions that are important to our study of Ephesians. The first has to do with whether or not Paul wrote the letter. It is surprising to find that the majority of biblical scholars today deny its Pauline authorship, most of them arguing that some brilliant assistant wrote Ephesians many years after Paul died, using his name for credibility.

Those who argue this way point out the impersonal character of Ephesians, which seems odd if Paul were writing to a church where he had preached for two and a half years. But this is explained when we realize that Ephesians seems to have been written as a theological tract for wider circulation. Additionally, scholars cite a significant difference in language and style between Ephesians and other known Pauline letters. Forty-one words appear only here, and eighty-four more are found in the New Testament but not elsewhere in Paul's letters. But other letters also have a distinctive style and vocabulary, and, as William Barclay observes, "It would be ridiculous to demand that a man with a mind like Paul's should never add to his vocabulary and should always express himself in the same way."⁸ Another argument is the similarity between Colossians and Ephesians; the theory is advanced that the writer of Ephesians used this other Pauline letter as his model. But it is hard to see how this similarity argues against rather than for Paul as the author of Ephesians.

Most importantly, this letter in God's Word explicitly claims to come from the apostle Paul. For another writer to have used his name involves fraud, especially since he asks for the readers to pray for his—Paul's—ministry. Such a situation

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is inconceivable within a biblical view of the divine inspiration of Scripture, and as Charles Hodge observed, Ephesians “reveals itself as the work of the Holy Ghost as clearly as the stars declare their maker to be God.”⁹ As for the legitimacy of pseudonymous writings, the early church vigorously excluded such frauds from the canon, punishing those who attempted to pass off their own writings as apostolic. The early church universally accepted Ephesians as Pauline, and objections to the contrary speak more eloquently against the state of scholarship today than they do about the authorship of this great letter.¹⁰

The second issue has to do with the recipients of the letter. The problem is that the best early manuscripts do not contain the words “in Ephesus” in Ephesians 1:1. This, combined with the impersonal style of the letter, strongly argues that Paul did not write this letter specifically to the church in Ephesus. I think the best explanation—though by no means certain—is that Paul wrote Ephesians as a circular letter or tract, which he sent with Colossians for the general benefit of the churches in western Asia Minor. Ephesians 6:21 says that a man named Tychicus would update the readers on Paul’s situation; Colossians 4:8 tells us that the same Tychicus was bearing that letter. It seems that Paul learned of the heresy in Colosse and wrote Colossians in response. Since his messenger would travel through Ephesus and up the Lycus Valley, Paul wrote Ephesians as well, which was intended for the building up of the churches along the way. This also explains the similarity between Ephesians and Colossians. Some scholars suggest that Ephesians is really the missing letter to Laodicea mentioned in Colossians 4:16, but in that case it is hard to see how later manuscripts incorporated the words “to . . . Ephesus” and why there are no copies listing Laodicea as the recipient of what we know as Ephesians.

Obviously, some mystery remains, but we can be sure that Paul the apostle wrote Ephesians along with Colossians for the

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benefit of churches in the vicinity of Ephesus in western Asia Minor, probably in the early A.D. 60s, during his first imprisonment at Rome.

PEACE WITH GOD

Paul concludes his salutation with words found at the beginning of almost all of his letters: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul always interjects theology into his greetings, and here at the outset he puts before us the two great themes of this letter: grace and peace. Ephesians 1–3 commends to us the grace of God in all its greatness, while Ephesians 4–6 calls us to the life of peace. The two are woven together all through Ephesians, the great message of which is the bringing together of all things in Christ by means of God’s grace and with the effect of peace through all God’s creation. Lloyd-Jones sums up this relationship between grace and peace: “Grace is the beginning of our faith; peace is the end of our faith. Grace is the fountain, the spring, the source. . . . But what does the Christian life mean, what is it meant to produce? The answer is ‘peace.’”¹¹

Before looking at the meaning and theological significance of grace, let us first consider the peace that comes from God and the Lord Jesus Christ. The first thing we need to understand is what the Bible means by peace and how the word is normally used today. For us, peace is the absence of strife, of war, of conflict. We sign peace treaties, and the only effect is that the actual fighting comes to a halt. The hatred is still there, the causes of strife are unrelieved, no sense of unity arises and certainly no love. Yet we celebrate such things as peace. The same is true in our workplaces and families. But the Bible always ridicules such an idea of peace. The prophet cried, “‘Peace, peace,’ they say, ‘when there is no peace’” (Jer. 6:14 NIV).

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The biblical idea of peace is very different. Here, the idea is mainly positive: It is *shalom*, the blessedness of peace and harmony. Leon Morris comments, “Paul . . . is not saying here that he trusts that the Ephesian believers will not find themselves caught up in a war. He is speaking about the deep and abiding peace that comes when people are right with God.”¹² R. C. Sproul expressed the contrast by referring to the attempts to avert World War II. He remarks, “There is a vast difference between Neville Chamberlain’s leaning over a balcony declaring, ‘We have achieved peace in our time’ and Jesus’ leaning over a table to say, ‘Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you; not as the world gives do I give to you’ (Jn. 14:27).”¹³

Peace is the great need of humankind. Our great problem is that there is no peace because of sin. First of all this pertains to our relationship with God. There is peace neither between man and God nor between God and man. Paul writes in Romans 8:7 that “the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (NIV). Paul begins Ephesians 2 by expounding this in detail, speaking of people’s transgressions and sins, their disobedience and their loyalty to a kingdom that is hostile to God’s kingdom. Lloyd-Jones explains, “Man by nature, as he is born into this world, is a hater of God. . . . He fights God, he is an enemy . . . everything in him by nature is utterly opposed to God.”¹⁴ That is the teaching of Ephesians. People will deny this; perhaps you do. But let me then ask you to submit your life to God, to give God the worship he is due, to serve his kingdom, to repent of your sins and let him tell you what to do, to let his law tell you what is right and wrong, to trust and love and follow God. We will find all too clearly that what the Bible says, is right. In your own strength, according to your sinful nature, you cannot and will not do it. Humankind is at war with God.

The inevitable result is that God is alienated from us in return. Paul begins his doctrinal section of Romans by saying,

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“The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Rom. 1:18). In Ephesians 2:3 Paul says that people, because of their sinful nature, are objects of God’s wrath. The peace of the gospel, then, is one that reconciles us to God through Jesus Christ. This is the great problem of the world—humanity is at enmity with God and under his wrath in return—and here is the great solution, one that not only solves the problem but also brings such great positive benefit—peace with God and peace from God. This peace comes only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The bulk of Ephesians 1 is given to praise of God for his many blessings of peace. First, he solves the problem and removes the barrier. The problem is sin; the answer is Christ the Redeemer, the only answer to the great problem of our alienation with God. He offered his blood to gain our forgiveness, dying in our place upon the cross. Here, too, we see the positive aspects of peace with God—not just the removal of conflict, not just a piece of paper saying there will be no fighting for a while. God’s peace means fellowship, unity, love. Ephesians 1:5 says that God adopted us as his children through Jesus Christ. This is peace—a right and loving relationship with God. Notice how Paul puts it in Ephesians 1:2; it is peace from God as our Father and Jesus Christ as our Lord. That is the relationship of peace that Paul wishes us through his gospel message, that we may be brought into God’s family with him as our Father and then have power to live with him in peace under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

All of this is through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; Paul’s gospel is centered on the person and work of Jesus. As he says in Ephesians 2:14, “He himself is our peace.” Do you know peace with God? Are you able to say you have his favor, his love? Do you love him in return, longing to do his will, to know him? The only way you can is by coming to God through faith in Christ, confessing your sin and enmity to God

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and trusting Christ's life and death and resurrection, all of which were given for you to be reconciled to God.

PEACE ON EARTH

But Paul's vision is not limited to peace between heaven and earth; he also sees peace reigning in the place of the turmoil of this world. What about peace among the nations—isn't this the very thing our age is clamoring for? Look back over the last century, and what progress have we really made? We have gone several decades without a world war, yet the world has been in constant strife all the same. Look at the hatred, the bombings, the violence—not just in the Middle East but also in Africa, in Europe, in our own cities. There is no peace upon the earth, and human attempts to produce it have been shown for their futility. Think, too, about our relationships, our families, our workplaces, our neighborhoods. Is there not division of every kind: racial, economic, ethnic, regional, and professional strife?

What is the answer? The answer is not training, not compulsion, not treaties; the problem is simply too deep for that. Man does not love God, and neither does he love his neighbor. But the gospel declared in Ephesians presents the answer: peace with God and peace from God.

Watchman Nee tells of a Chinese Christian who had his rice field on a hill. Every day he had to hand-work a water wheel to lift water from the irrigation stream at the base of the hill. His neighbor had two fields below his, and one night he made a hole in the wall that separated their property so that the Christian's water would all drain down into his fields. The Christian was understandably angry, but he wanted to honor God, and so he took the matter to his church. There, the Christians reasoned that if he retaliated, he would be little different from everybody else. Wanting to show that peace with God

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gave him peace in his struggles with his fellow man, the Christian decided what to do. The next day he went down to the water wheel and first pumped water into his neighbor's two fields and then, working late into the day, filled his own fields. When he was done his neighbor came out to ask why he would possibly do such a thing, and that conversation ultimately led to the man's conversion to Christianity.¹⁵ The Christian had peace with God, and he extended that peace to his fellow, sinful man. We need to do the same, and especially to live in peace with our brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Men and women are at war not just with God, and not just with others, but also within themselves. Isaiah 57:20–21 says:

“But the wicked are like the tossing sea;
for it cannot be quiet,
and its waters toss up mire and dirt.
There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

Humanity in sin is pulled apart, with an internal conflict we cannot subdue. Sin makes us slaves of the world and the devil, of the cravings of the flesh—that is how Paul describes us in Ephesians 2—and yet we are not able to escape our knowledge of God and our need for him or the reality that we were made in his image and for his pleasure. Isaiah put it exactly right—we are caught between two great influences like the churning sea with the earth and the moon each pulling it, with no peace of mind, no rest of spirit, no satisfaction of heart. Like the ocean when it meets the shore, our waves churn up mire and muck.

Do you know something about that? Of course you do. We are made by God in such a way that we can have peace within ourselves only when and as we have peace with him. You will never have peace in rebellion against God, by doing

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things your own way, establishing your position as the captain of your own soul. No, peace comes only through submission to the Almighty, by faith in the Savior who removes the enmity and sends God's Spirit of peace. This is why Paul is able to tell Christians, even in the midst of the greatest turmoil this life can bring, in the face of death and poverty and sorrow and storm, that through faith in Christ they may approach God himself for help. This is why a Christian can face the terrible news of a fatal disease, the loss of a job, persecution from the world—peace from God! Paul writes in Philippians 4:7, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." What we so desperately need is the peace of God, which comes only through peace with God through Jesus Christ, the peacemaker.

GRACE TO YOU

How do we gain this peace? How are we to have peace with God and therefore the peace of God? The answer is God's grace. Can we repair our broken relationship with God? Can we perform works to appease God? No, for nothing we can ever do removes the guilt of our past sins, and nothing we do is free from the stain of sinful motives and corruption. In short, we cannot save ourselves—this is the true problem Paul sets before us in Ephesians—and God must therefore save us. Ephesians 2:4 explains this, first drawing out the true extent of our problem in sin but then pointing to our only hope: "God, being rich in mercy." Our hope of salvation, our pathway to peace, is the grace of God, who is rich in mercy.

This is the first sense in which we should consider this matter of grace, as something in God, an outworking of God's attributes of goodness and mercy. "God is love," said the apostle John (1 John 4:8). Paul says in Romans 5:8, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for

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us.” Grace is often defined as God’s unmerited favor. That is true, but it does not go far enough. Grace is God’s favor to us when we have merited the opposite. We have earned his hatred and wrath and condemnation. And yet he causes us to be forgiven and made his precious children. He brings us into his household and lavishes us with every good thing. He gives that which is most precious to himself—his only Son—that he might remove our offense on the cross and by his blood reconcile us to God. This is the measure of God’s grace, and Paul wants us to learn this in our study of Ephesians. “I pray,” he writes in Ephesians 3:17–18, “that you . . . may have power . . . to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (NIV). We are saved by God’s grace alone, he says in Ephesians 2:8, not by our works but by God’s gift; not because we loved him, for we have not loved God, but because he loved us and sent his Son to bear our sins and to be our peace.

Thus when Paul says, “Grace to you . . . from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” he first means the grace in God that motivates him to save us. But he also means the whole redemptive plan of God, the grace by which he has worked in history to plan and accomplish and then apply his redemptive purpose for us. That is what we will soon consider in detail as we get into Ephesians 1. God planned our redemption before the creation of the world, choosing us in Christ for holiness and predestinating us to be his children (Eph. 1:4–5). When the right time had come, he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem us from our sins and gain our forgiveness (Eph. 1:7). Then he brought us to the realization of this salvation at a particular point in time through the gift of faith, making known to us this mystery of his will (Eph. 1:9). Now, he is working in us by the Holy Spirit for the completion of what is but a beginning (Eph. 1:13–14). Here is God’s grace, a great and unstoppable plan for our salvation, a grace on which we may

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utterly rely and which is all, as Paul sums up in Ephesians 1:14, “to the praise of his glory.”

Finally, grace is God’s power working in us for newness of life. This, too, Paul greatly desires that we should learn in Ephesians. His prayer at the end of Ephesians 1 makes this clear. He prays that “having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, . . . you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead” (Eph. 1:18–20). God has grace for us, resurrection power to live as children of light, a redeemed people living holy lives to the praise of his name.

This is the good news worked out in this Book of Ephesians, Paul’s gospel of Jesus Christ. We might summarize it all in this way: “Peace through grace in Jesus Christ.” Have you received the grace of God for your salvation? Are you able to say you have peace with God, and as a result you increasingly know the peace of God? Do you increasingly possess love and harmony with other people, peace and calm and joy and contentment within your heart? Do you have power for new obedience, grace for fellowship with God? If you do, it is only because of God’s grace, and you should praise him with the whole of your life. If you do not, you need only ask him for it, for God freely gives his grace to all who come through Jesus Christ, trusting him to be their peace, to the praise of God in his glorious grace.