

A Re-Centering on God

Intro

- If we are to ever take growth in God seriously, we must take repentance seriously.
 - I do not mean just confession but repentance: a turning away from ourselves and other things, to turning towards God.
 - In fact one of the measures of growth you could say is how much repentance figures in your life
 - **Repentance must be a consistent feature in our lives**
- Martin Luther coined the phrase “incurvatus in se,” and tells us this:
 - *‘Scripture describes man as so curved in upon himself, that he uses not only physical but even spiritual goods for his own purposes, and in all things seeks only himself’ (Luther’s Works, vol. 25, p. 345, see also pp. 291-92).*
 - Jeremiah 17:9, and Romans 7:15, 18-19 also expresses this same idea
- **We are so blinded in our depravity that, save for the grace of God, it is impossible for us to escape the vice grip of selfishness, and sadly enough, we are mostly ignorant of this truth**
- Furthermore Luther says

- *Our nature [is]...so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them...but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly...and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.*

- Let me give an **example with 2 parts** here to further illustrate this point

- Many of you are aware of the prosperity gospel, **which is a belief that financial/material blessings and divine physical health are always the will of God for every believer. Faith, positive confession and sowing seeds are ways of procuring God's best for you.** Stephen Hunt says

- ...In short, this means that "health and wealth" are the automatic divine right of all Bible-believing Christians and may be procured by faith as part of the package of salvation, since the Atonement of Christ includes not just the removal of sin, but also the removal of sickness and poverty.

- **What powers the prosperity gospel is this nature of man curved in on himself, this self centeredness where we even seek God, simply for our end.**

- **And very often proponents of this theology fail to realize our curved in on themselves they are**

- **It is funny at times when I see it displayed but at other times, it isn't because I know how hurtful it can be to people who place their faith in it**

- But here is where I am going, while I point and laugh at this theology, there are times, where the posture of my heart is also curved in on itself.

- In a sense, what my actions are saying is **“God, Thank you that I am not like those Prosperity Teachers”**, which is reminiscent of the Pharisee in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14.

- Do you see how **pride is making me curved in on myself?**

- Do you **see how even in the light of the truth, I can be curved in on myself**
- Please do not get me wrong. I am all for denouncing prosperity gospel, I only want to show here how I can be curved in on myself even when I am standing in the light.

- Indeed **‘The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?’**

- My prayer and hope today is that as we journey together, there is a turning to God, where we move from being curved in on ourselves to turning to God.
 - I am praying there is a reorientation to God, a recentering of our hearts on God, where God is our reference point, in all things, and all times.

Text

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

Context

- Location
- The earliest manuscripts of this book do not contain **the location "Ephesus" in verse 1**, and it is strange that a location was left out as the rendering of the original Greek would be **"the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus."**
 - In addition, Paul doesn't address anyone within the Church at Ephesus, which is strange given he spent about 3 years there.
- **Therefore, the conclusion is that this letter was sent to churches in Southwestern Asia minor and was linked specific to the Church at Ephesus at a later time**
- Origin
- We must note that **Paul wrote Ephesians while in prison**, and it was written about the same time along with Colossians and Philemon.
 - **This alone should jolt us, seeing that God could use Paul to pen a letter of such influence, while in prison**
- **The letter to Colossae was written as a response to growing heresies in the church, introducing pagan elements that was elevating principalities and powers within the universe.**
 - Although these heresies made room for the divinity of Christ, the end result of these heresies **was denying the supremacy of Christ and the completeness of**

his redemptive work. This is why **Paul stresses the preeminence of Christ in Colossians 1:15-21** for example

- Ephesians, in contrast, was written, it seems **from a place of reflection**. Perhaps after finishing Colossians, Paul wrote this letter to develop the theme of Christ's person, his work, our unity in him, and implications for our lives.
 - This letter comes from **a place of deep reflection for a man who knows his time is short, who is currently facing the grim reality of persecution, and one who must have sensed by now that the end is not far off.**
 - Perhaps **this is why he sat back after responding to the growing crisis in Colossae, and penned this letter to a multitude of churches - meaning it was to be read and then copied for other churches**
- Most of Ephesians is centered around the **theme of God's work in and for us, our identity and its implications**. One theologian describes Ephesians as:
 - "The Letter was written to encourage Gentile Christians to appreciate the dignity of their calling, with its implications not only for their heavenly origin and destiny, but also for their present conduct on earth, as those who were heirs of God, sealed with the Holy Spirit." - FF Bruce
- In addition, I do want to add that churches, at this point in history, were not the organized form of religion we have today. **There were mostly seen as a new cult of sorts.**
 - **It wasn't popular and like you see with Paul, there were repercussions for those joining "The Way"**

- So people took these letters more seriously as they were betting their lives on following “The Way”
- I gave all that background to help bring us to a place **where we locate ourselves within this text and listen with both our ears and hearts to what God might say to us.**

God as The Primary Actor

- What I want to do is walk through the text and highlight the main point **God is the primary actor in our lives.**
 - By saying God is the primary actor, by implication I mean **there are other actors - you, me, family, friends, Satan, etc.**
 - What I do want to show that **God is decisively the primary actor** in our lives.
- Paul kicks off Eppehsians by laying out the
 - **The proper worldview for Christians,**
 - **Our place in that world view, pointing to the purpose of God and how God is actively working to that end.**
 - From this grounding of our identity will flow forth right living - the new community
- **Basically, Paul is after our grounding in Christ, so that we become the good tree that bears the good fruit (right living).**

- An apostle of Christ...by the will of God
- **Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus** by the will of God
- The word apostle literally means the “sent one,” and as used in the NT, it has two meanings
 - In a broader sense, it applies to messengers of the Church
 - In a more technical or narrower sense, **it refers to a position/title of authority within the Church and an apostle**, you can say is qualified by a couple of things - those **who have seen the risen Christ, those who have received direct commission from Christ**, amongst other things, and that is **mainly the twelve apostles, and Paul**.
- And Paul isn't simply an apostle (one sent with a commission), he is an **apostle of Christ Jesus**, and **by the Will of God**.
- The will of God of God is a theme that shows up often in Ephesians and if you read just a couple verses down, it shows up again and again. **The point here is not discovering the will of God for a particular situation but to show the driving force of God's action for humanity.**
 - **In essence Paul is an apostle because it is what God wants.**
- It is not because **Paul deserved it** but simply because **this is what God wants** in his Sovereign goodness.

- What I am hoping you see per the phrase the will of God is that **you see the deliberate action of God, not only in Paul's life, but in all of humanity, before the beginning of time. And this includes your life.**
- I want you to see the **deliberate foreplanning and foreknowledge of God about you and what he wants to do in your life, spanning from eternity past to eternity future.**
- **God is not sitting by idly where you are concerned, he is actively working to draw you to himself if you will have him.**
 - Paul could never have scripted the way his life will turn out. God as the deft and skilled maker was working to bring Paul to himself, to be his apostle to the gentiles
 - I am certain this wasn't Paul's plan for his own life
- **As you look at where you are at this moment, and the things you are wrestling with, what are the implications of knowing that God is actively at work in your life and situations?**
 - **Perhaps this helps you in being more comfortable with uncertainty, because you are trusting that God is at work**
 - **Perhaps this reorients you to God as your reference point in your decision making**
 - **Perhaps this helps you rest your head on the pillow of His Sovereignty in the midst of afflictions**

- The Saints and the Faithful

- **To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus**

- By using the word **“saints,”** Paul is not addressing his recipients as **pious individuals** by their actions and attitudes, rather he is reminding them that they too have been called to be “Set Apart” **by God for Himself.**

- We see the same reference in the OT where God calls Israel his holy people (Exo 19:6)

- Paul applies **the word “saints” to everyone**, not a select few, **showing at once the privilege and responsibility of the calling on every Christian**

- Just as Paul has been appointed (set apart) by God as an apostle, we too have been set apart (separated to God - this is the key idea in holiness) to be his people.

- **I hope you are seeing God the driving force of God’s action here again, and how God is working for all of us.**

- **The focus is entirely on God’s action and the reference is to God’s saving work**

- What I want you to see is that **not only is God active in our lives, his purpose for us is captured in the implication of the word “saints.”** We are set apart or separated unto God to be holy and blameless before him (Ephesians 1:4)

- In other words we begin to see glimpses of election here but I want to stress that the **purpose of election is conformity to the image of Christ**

- **God’s purpose for us is conformity to His image, and his work for us is to this end**

- This aligns with the other descriptive phrase Paul uses, which is “**To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus**”
- **The faithful in Christ Jesus are those who are on that journey of trusting fully in Christ i.e. their faith/trust is in Christ** - you can read that as those who are on the journey of becoming Christlike
- **The goal of God for you i.e. who you are becoming, is not going to be as a result of how upstanding you are or how much you can obey his law, but it is based on his saving work in you.**
 - Read that as God being the primary actor in your life
- Let me say this again “**God’s purpose for us is conformity to His image, and he works in you to this end, no matter where you are at this point**”
 - This is a good time for us to **contrast how we often feel about ourselves to the way God sees us in Christ.** We, due to our sins, feel weighed down and burdened.
 - We feel we are no good **but God sees us as saints in Christ, and those who are faithful in Christ, and he works to that end - the end of conforming us to his image.**
- Grace and Peace
 - **Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**
- Right after hinting at election, and showing us who we are called to be, Paul **offers two blessings** unto us in the form of Grace and Peace.

- The themes of Grace and Peace depict **God's initial work of drawing us to himself and his continued work of transforming us into his image.**
- **His grace is there to empower us to accept him, renounce ungodliness, turn to him and live upright lives (see Titus 2:11-13), and his peace will remind us of his faithfulness and the wholeness he has in mind, as his goal for us**
 - Both his grace and peace are there to **remind us that God is the primary actor in our lives, and he works to bring us into conformity to his image**
- Conclusion
- What I hope you are seeing so far is how theocentric Paul is with this greeting. Paul takes a typical form of greeting and Christianizing this cultural norm
 - The author and recipients are identified **in lieu of their relation with Christ**
 - "Instead of using the standard word "greeting" [chairein], through a play on words Paul changed his greeting to read "**grace [charis]** and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." - NIVAC
- What I want you to take away at this point is that **God is the primary actor in your life. He is actively at work to bring you to himself, if you will have him, and conform you to his image.**
- **His purpose for you has almost nothing to do with your career but more to do with who you are becoming. And that purpose is for you to become conformed to his image and likeness**

- It was AW Tozer that said **“When I understand that everything happening to me is to make me more Christlike, it resolves a great deal of anxiety”**
- In light of what we have looked at so far, I hope **your shoulders are a little bit more relaxed knowing that your fate is not in your hands.**
- I hope your heart is lifted up a bit knowing that **the One who loves you, through life and death, is actively at work for your sake.**
- **God is the primary actor in your life, not you. For those who have truly put their faith in Him, He will work in and through you to bring you to himself**

Implications

- You mean much to God (From Eternity to Eternity)
- When you **come to truly realize, and know that God has had you in mind from eternity past, and he is at work to secure you, now and into eternity future, it has a strangely calming, loving and deeply joyful effect on your soul**
- First of all, it produces this loving effect because you can see **the extent God goes to in the life, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ Jesus**
 - You mean much to God, **hence why he left all his glory in heaven to come live amongst us and become a sacrifice, an atonement for your sins**
 - You mean much to God, hence why he braved death and Hades for you
 - **You mean much to God, hence why he gave you his best gift, himself**

- You mean much to God, hence why he has promised that **he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ**
- Let me say this again:
 - When you **come to truly realize, and know that God has had you in mind from eternity past, and he is at work to secure you, now and into eternity future, it has a strangely calming, loving and deeply joyful effect on your soul**
- When I say joyful effect, I have in mind this pervasive and overall sense of well-being.
 - **Why? Because you know Him who loves from eternity to all eternity**
- In addition, there is this deep resting in your soul for you have a grasp on the reality of what is around you
 - **Why? Because you know how it all ends**
- So as you sometimes struggle with challenges in life, remember that you are made for more - and that more is becoming Christlike. Everything else is fading away.
 - The sickness, affliction, career heights, affluence, etc...will all fade & pass away
- You mean much to God, and so from eternity to all eternity, **He is at work for your sake. He is at work to bring present you as that spotless bride, not because you are sinless but because He wills it so**
- Is Christ Savior and Lord of your life?
- In light of all that God has done - his deliberate willing and acting to draw you to himself (if you will have him), and to conform you to his image, the question is:
 - Are you at place to allow Christ to be both Savoir and Lord of your life?

- Do not be so quick to answer that question. Let me be clear on some things
 - I am not asking if you ready to **bite down, get your act together and be near perfect and never intentionally sin**
 - I am also not asking if you are ready to **practice moral legalism**
- What I am asking is this
 - Are you willing to walk this journey of repentance and submission to God...
 - a journey that will show you your sinfulness as well as the love of God...
 - a journey where you increasingly, over time, become more and more like Christ..because you are willing to trust him
 - And even being able to trust him will come from you turning to him for help
 - I am asking if you are willing to become fully dependent on Christ. I am asking if you are willing to follow him, one step at a time...
 - and yes you will fail and stumble but as long as you keep resting on Him, He will ensure you your transformation into Christlikeness
- There is a widespread heresy that, if we are being truthfully we make room for in one-way or another.
 - It is this idea that what **you do, especially what you repeatedly do, doesn't matter, as long as you believe in Christ**
- It is true that **we are saved by grace alone through faith alone.** However, **if we are truly saved, our lives, overtime, will begin to take on the nature of Christ.**
 - **Why? Because this is God's goal for us. Let me make this clearer**

- On one hand, you have someone like me a sinner, dead in his sins, curved in on himself, without knowing it
- On the other hand, you have God's goal for me - conformity to his image, all that God represents, his Omnipotence and Sovereignty
 - Note that his goal my comfort or happiness or career success or pleasure or wealth or health
- If those two forces collide, who wins out? Of course it is God
 - So if I truly accept him as savior and Lord, and if he is truly Omnipotent, then the only possible end for us, is becoming like Christ
- To be in the Kingdom of God means that we, **over time**, grow into his likeness.
- Jesus cannot simply be Savior **and not Lord/Master**
 - A. W. Tozer expressed this by saying
 - "... a notable heresy has come into being throughout evangelical Christian circles--the widely-accepted concept that we humans can choose to accept Christ only because we need him as Savior and that we have the right to postpone our obedience to him as Lord as long as we want to!"
 - Dallas Willard continues this thought by saying:
 - This 'heresy' has created the impression that it is quite reasonable to be a "vampire Christian." One in effect says to Jesus: "I'd like a little of your blood, please. But I don't care to be your student or have your character. In fact, won't you just excuse me while I get on with my life, and I'll see you in heaven."

- o There heresy is the idea that Jesus accepts me as I am - **and underneath that is this sense of I can continue in my sin** because Jesus loves me and accepts me as I am.

- **The sense here is that I do not need to change**

- o In reality it is that **God loves you despite where and who you are**, and He is always about **conforming you into the image of His Son** (Rom 8:29)

- Do you see the subtlety of the enemy in perverting grace? Is grace simply a way for me to justify continuing in sin? In Titus 2:11-12, Paul answers the question by reminding Titus that

- o **[For] the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age**

- **Question for you –**

- o How are you truly doing per becoming like your master, an apprentice that strives to be like his master
- o **Do we take seriously our apprenticeship to Christ?**
- o Do we have a sense of **healthy responsibility to make ourselves available to the Holy Spirit** to do his redemptive and transformative work in us?

- **The Pillow of His Sovereignty**

- Having touched on

- o God's undying love for you, and

- the importance of weighing our heart and where we stand

- **I also want to speak to the harsh realities of life. Life is usually not a bed of roses and theology/doctrines are meant to help us make meaning of life.**

Theology/doctrines are not simply intellectual pontification, they are to bring in contact with God in our daily lives

- So maybe

- **You are facing the potential loss of a loved one**
- **There is a burden on your heart and a desire you have prayed and toiled for but all just seems hopeless**
- **You are battling with depression and there is a seeming meaninglessness to life, a colorless hue to life, so to say**
- **There are health challenges within your family or there is a dreaded diagnosis that hangs over your head**
- **You are struggling with sexual immorality and lustful thoughts or porn**
- **The challenge for you is finding a sense of purpose in life**

- There are a couple things I want to say

- **You are never alone, God is the primary actor in your life. He **who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?****

- The name Emmanuel, God is with us, guarantees he is always with you

- Borrow **strength from your community of believers** around you

- This is not a race we run on our own, hence why we are told to not neglect the fellowship of our brethren
- Paul is addressing the collective body of the church
- Borrow **perspective from those who have walked this journey of life** before us
 - Go to the teacher in Ecclesiastes and learn the wisdom
 - Sit with Moses atop the pishgah and see life through his eyes, maybe as captured in Psalm 90
 - In your anger/rage against God in your affliction or per a longing not fulfilled, let Job disciple you as you read through the book of Job, and especially Job 38-42 when God responds to Job
 - The purpose of the book of Job is to show the Sufficiency and Sovereignty of God
 - Sovereignty - he is in total control, the primary actor. So whether good or evil comes, God is still sovereign. He is the one in charge
 - Sufficiency - he is acting for your good, and can make even the worst of situations turn out well
 - This particular exercise I find fascinating. Of all the questions Job asked God, do you realize that God doesn't answer them, at least not directly
 - What God does though is to show Job his sufficiency

- For seeing the sufficiency of God, not only answers Jobs current questions but all questions that could ever come up again
- When life is tough, lean into the eternal perspective of God, to see how all things end in Revelations 21 and 22
- When you question your belovedness, go back to Psalm 139 and see the beauty that you are
 - Go to Isaiah 53, read the whole chapter to see the extent God goes for you. See in verse 10 that it was the will of God to crush Christ for your sake and this was about 700 years before Jesus was born
- When faced with the pain of death or losing a loved one, recognize that we do not mourn as those who have no hope. Death is but a doorway.
 - In reality, on the other side, with God, the one who passes through the physical death is far more alive than they ever were here.
- If I were to summarize, all I am saying per our struggles and challenges is that we learn to **rest our head on the pillow of God's Sovereignty**. Said another way, we learn to rest our heads on His greatness (his power and might) and his goodness (his love for you)
- And one of the critical ways of doing this is to **feast on his word** for the sole purpose of growing in intimacy with Him.
 - **Feast on His Word, really on Him, to see his faithfulness over and over again**
 - And then let that settle into you, **knowing that He who was faithful to Abraham, to David, to John the Baptist, to the disciples, will be faithful to you**
 - It doesn't mean things will end how you want it to end, but he will be faithful

- And here is a fitting word on his faithfulness from Jude 1
 - **24 Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy,**
 - **25 to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.**

Re-centering on God: Simplicity

- Having said all the above, I do want to leave you with a homework
- In his book Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster writes “[In contemporary society, our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in “muchness” and “manyness”, he will rest satisfied.](#)”
- Let me break this down further
 - In the muchness and busyness, **there is a tendency to keep running, without taking stock of who we are becoming**
 - We generally take stock of our careers and sometimes our goals but usually not of who we are becoming
 - The **enemy majors in distractions so you do not notice how you are becoming something else other than Christ.** Without **slowing down and reflecting, you do not see how you are increasingly being curved in on yourself.**
 - Maybe your heart has grown increasingly cynical, selfish and calculated in a bid to protect yourself

- Maybe you so prone to normalizing and rationalizing sin
- Maybe **you barely take time to simply be with God**, and you have in essence become a functional atheist
- Maybe **vanity (couched under ambition of a comfortable life or greed)** has become you main driving force
- Maybe **it has become second nature to me to look down on others that are not within my social circle/standing** - and I rationalize that as “I just want things to be nice and classy”
- We know deep down that **there is a God shaped hole in our hearts**, but rather than turn to God, we turn to quick fixes of the shiny and new
 - The accolades, recognition, and promotion we long for
 - The marriage & family we so desire
 - The financial freedom to travel the world and the next vacation, and the next wonder of the world
 - The next “in” thing
- **Without slowing down, I often cannot really know God**
 - Why? Because I do not get to study his word or reflect or pray
 - And because I do not get to know him, I can't know myself, at least my true self
- Without time to be quiet, can I really see that **God is my deepest desire?**

- Without this quietness, **can I truly hear God and not be so subject to every whim of desire that stirs within me? Can I truly draw my mind back to what God has been telling?**
- **With noise, hurry, and crowds, I do not get to see and listen to those around me who are hurting; those who are reaching out to me in their pain but I do not have eyes to see**
- So here is the homework - and it is a practice of simplicity. There is more to the matter of simplicity but for today, let us start here:
 - Take out at least 30 minutes every day of this coming week, and be in solitude and silence
 - By this I mean, sit down somewhere comfortable or take a walk in the park, lay down the usual things that you do and interact with including your phone, and simply rest
 - By resting I mean
 - Maybe take in the beauty around you in the park and let it speak of the faithfulness of God
 - Maybe sit in a silent corner of your home and let your mind go to your fav memories and see the goodness of God
 - Maybe take a thought like the ones below and just feast on it, letting it bring joy to your heart
 - **The unending and unchanging love of God for you**
 - **The provision and power of God for you**

- **The forgiveness of sins; really the miracle of miracles**
- **The fact that God is with us in all we face**
- **Your adoption into the family of God**
- The reality of God working for your sake
 - Jesus interceding for you - Heb 7:25
 - The Holy Spirit praying for you - Rom 8:26
- Write what comes to mind in a journal and pray as God leads you