

“Our Extravagant God”

Ephesians 1:3-14

Dale Green

July 11, 2021

Text: How we praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every blessing in heaven because we belong to Christ. (Ephesians 1:3)

I have thought about this a lot, this unique, unusual, storied faith that we carry as Christians. I've hunted around the idea of the difference between our average Jane or Joe walking in our world and our average Christian. I've looked at the value of believing and following the life and blessings of Jesus Christ, the difference of it, the uniqueness of it, and even the mystery of it. I've studied and preached on it often and it still makes me scratch my head.

Consider this passage from Ephesians 1:3.

If you were to enter a stadium with a homogeneous mixture of the American public and read our reading from Ephesians today, it would fall on so many deaf ears, so little understanding, such strange words. Yet, this represents the most absolute truth in all of Christian life - that God is real and God has a plan, centered on Jesus, that we are a part of.

So, I want to look at our 2 passages today, thinking about our unique relationship with God, starting with the verses from 2 Samuel.

Maybe you can get a feel for David's excitement over the ark coming into "the City of David". It represented God with Israel. It was clear to king David that where the ark was - blessings came, judgement was sealed, and the future realized. This was a critical part of who David was and what Israel was to become.

Historically, The Ark was constructed approximately 1 year after the Hebrews left Egypt. It was God with them as represented by the Lord's commandments held within. God guided them daily in their 40 years in the desert with it and then the Ark, carried before them, caused the Jordan river to be parted as they entered the promised land.

The Ark was used in their very 1st battle, against Jericho, which was won by God's power alone by marching the Ark around the city and screaming and blowing horns to topple the mighty protective walls there.

Joshua set the ark up in Shiloh in the tent of meeting and God spoke to the leaders there just like in the desert with Moses.

Years later, around 1180, long after Joshua's death, Israel lost a battle against the Philistines and the leaders, thinking the ark would assure their victory, took it from Shiloh to the field of battle. Bad move! The Philistines found out that the mighty Ark of God was with Israel but instead of striking fear in them, it motivated them to win!

The Philistines routed Israel in battle and took the Ark to one of their own cities, into their pagan temple next to their God.

Again, bad move! In the temple their idol, Dagon, suffered damage over and over again, like falling over and having its head cut off and their people also suffered a plague wherever the Ark was taken. After 7 disastrous months in 3 different Philistine cities of Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron, they decided to return it to Israel.

The Ark remained outside Jerusalem for over 20 years until this scene today. It went from the house of Abinadab to the house of Obed-Edom where after it stayed another 3 months. David had gotten scared of the power of the Ark because one of Abinadab's sons had died for just trying to steady it. But, David was determined. When he heard that Obed was receiving great blessings on account of the Ark, he moved to bring it to Jerusalem. Well, enough Ark history.

David didn't just want the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem, the city of David, he wanted it celebrated and the people to see God as Israel's and Israel as God's. The worship of God had been lost in the time of Saul and David longed to renew the nation to the worship of Yahweh. To do that, he wants to bring the long-neglected Ark into his new capital city as a sign that the Lord, the true King over Israel, was once again in the midst of His people.¹

¹ Dr. Ralph F. Wilson, *David Brings the Ark to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6) (number 8 in series)*, Jesus Walk Bible Study Series, http://www.jesuswalk.com/david/08_david_ark.htm Accessed 7/5/21.

So, David became extravagant before this extravagant God. He brought a crowd, he danced and jumped up and down and made wild music before God. This scene was very much like the Ark overthrowing Jericho with Joshua.

Joshua 20: ²⁰ So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down.

2 Samuel 6: ⁵ David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with castanets,^[4] harps, lyres, timbrels, sistrums and cymbals.

And this is David's plan, that all worship would be extravagant worship before an extravagant God. 1 Chronicles tells us that David

“...appointed some of the Levites to minister before the ark of the LORD, to **make petition, to give thanks, and to praise** the LORD, the God of Israel.... They were to **play the lyres and harps, ... to sound the cymbals, and to blow the trumpets** regularly before the ark of the covenant of God." (1 Chronicles 16:4-6)

In Jerusalem that day, David didn't just finish the celebration with worship but also by showering gifts on his people Israel. He sent them home to their new changed reality with what looks like a big holiday feast from our translation, of bread and grapes and cake. A better translation is likely that he sent them each home with bread, part of the sacrifice of meat made to God that day, and a keg of raisins or a flask of wine, depending on how you read the Hebrew.

But why the food, I mean a whole lot of food?

This isn't a trivial matter - Remember this procession started with 30,000 men and in this case, it also included women, so maybe 50-60K meals?

Quite a gift!

Our regrets but we're not sending you home with bread, meat, and a flagon today!

We don't know the reason for the gift but we do know that David was well acquainted with hunger.

There's this scene from 1 Samuel 21 where David was a wanted man running from king Saul and becomes so hungry that he takes the show bread from the priest Ahimelech at Nob. Jesus refers to the scene in David's life when he makes the statement that the Sabbath is for man not man for the sabbath. Maybe David is foreshadowing, and like Jesus, is trying to show Israel that the people are not just for God, but that God is for the people. The Lord is extravagant and the Lord showers gifts on his people.

A number of years ago my cousin Roger was visiting his wife Arlene who was seriously ill, in the hospital. Roger was about 30 years older than me and his parents, like my grandparents, had been founding members and involved in the original building of our church. He was an engineer, a burly man, always working with tools and heavy equipment and teaching his three boys how to be three good, strong, ethical Christian men. Over lunch in that grand hospital cafeteria my cousin told me - with copious tears flowing from his eyes - how amazing our extravagant God had been throughout his life. He used words now lacking in the wide scope of our world today; words like compassion, kindness, mercy, and grace - all words used in our passage today. My cousin was a great mentor in my life - a man's man, and a man infected with the spiritual blessings showered on him. Ephesians was his kind of book.

Who wrote the book we call Ephesians? We don't really know. Tradition says the Apostle Paul but there is a lot of evidence to the contrary. It reads like the writer didn't know the church in Ephesus but Paul spent about 3 years there, personally building that church from the ground up.

The words and expressions convey what Paul wrote about but not the way Paul would be expected to write it. The thoughts are very complex, using many run-on phrases that are classically Greek and written in well-educated Greek prose, much of which was not Paul's style or capability. The betting money has it that the book came from the Apostle himself from prison but that Paul dictated this to a scribe for all the churches, who made copies of the letter for each church and the manuscript that made it into scripture was from the letter addressed to Ephesus. We'll follow tradition and just call him Paul.

Paul here uses what has been termed “the excess of the language of worship.”² He is offering us an endless stream of praise and wonder and mystery, as if he means to lift his church, and us by inclusion, to the very heights of God’s presence.³

Paul tells us that blessings in heaven are given to us from God because of Jesus. In fact, they are the direct result of our belonging to Christ. Every blessing that we have springs from our relationship to God in being Christian.

Verses 8 and 9 remind us that the blessing of God’s grace is undeserved, given by the Lord’s desire alone, and not our actions. And that’s a good thing - right? What if we were in charge of our blessings?

Our call to worship this morning should remind us that we inherently fall short. It was easy to read but if you read it like a Q&A it becomes a little ominous:

Who will receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation?

Only those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.

To this, our response should be the same as the disciples exclaimed to Jesus in Matthew 19:

“Who then can be saved”??

But God’s unmerited mercy is the Lord’s compassion and kindness toward us instead of the judgment we should receive.

By God’s mercy our judgement, instead, becomes our salvation. How extravagant is that?

We are restored to clean hands and pure hearts, we are forgiven for seeking what is false and swearing deceitfully

² Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: a Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary*, Year B (London: Continuum International Pub. Group, 1994), 66.

³ David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B, vol. 3 (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 230.

and all of this is only done in God's grace and God's mercy, through Christ.

And then, Paul says, it gets even better because, for some reason, we are actually God's gifts that the Lord delights in... (verse 11). God actually delights in us!

A lot has gone on in our lives in the past couple years - true?

Right now, people everywhere are all talking about "getting back to normal".

Water under the bridge, down memory lane, in the rear-view mirror.

Really? But what's normal, really?

Look around us - look across the street where the ghost of the word "Applebee's" sits on the sign post, or look next door at the fence around a place that had kids playing and music blaring all day long, not that long ago. A friend of mine from High School lost 8 family members to Covid and his sister's house and whole neighborhood was devastated by a wildfire that ripped right through their little Oregon town last fall.

Look inside of us - I'm anxious all the time, and I don't know why.

How we have all changed over the past year plus. It sure doesn't feel normal.

But the words of this book never change. Our great need for God changes with us, not with God. God's promises, they remain the same.

And I see this play out every day as a hospital Chaplain at Lawrence and Memorial in New London when people in serious physical trouble profess no higher power see nothing beyond themselves when they themselves are failing. And then there are people in the same situation, who know God and the Lord's promises and stand on those promises as their strength.

And these promises are - timeless.

Only 30 years ago the Presbyterian church adopted the Brief Statement of Faith we used as our confession this morning. That statement uses words like

- *we trust in God*
- *God created the world good*
- *Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God*
- *The Holy Spirit everywhere the giver and re-newer of life*

- *And nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

These are some pretty extravagant promises.

Add to that, 2000 years ago the apostle Paul explained how Jesus loved us with an extravagant love, and 3200 years ago David danced and made extravagant music before an extravagant God, celebrating Israel's return to their rightful King.

These are all assurances to and from the same God who loves us and who always will. They are from the same God who said he would never leave you nor forsake you (**Deut 31**) and from the same Jesus who said:

³⁵Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

(Mat 24)

So, if there's someone here looking at me like this is all crazy-talk, do yourself a favor and grab a friend and ask them why none of this is crazy. Ask them about a God who never changes, even when they do. Ask them about a God who would sacrifice all for a sinner like you and me.

Let them show you that our Lord is truly an extravagant God.

Amen.