

The Mystery Unveiled

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a six-part series

May 9, 2021

©2021 Scott L. Engle

Ephesians 1:7–10 (NRSV)

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Ephesians 2:4–10 (NRSV)

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

The story we tell, a mystery unveiled – from darkness to light.

Young homeowners today don't know how good they have it. Something broken around the house? Go to YouTube and there will be a video, often a really good one, to help you fix the problem. I replaced an electrical panel once without the help of YouTube. I'm lucky I didn't kill electrocute myself and burn the house down.

But, alas, there is no handy YouTube video for what ails the human race. As Paul writes in Ephesians, much of the world lives in darkness, trapped in the futility of their sin-distorted minds, alienated from God, the one who gave them life and loves them (4:17-18). The truth that there is something wrong with humanity that we cannot fix on our own is fast becoming lost. Too many see the manifestations of the wrongness, of sin, but fail to grasp the truth that we must be rescued from ourselves.

But God has done for us what we are unable to do for ourselves. As Paul writes, we were dead in our trespasses and sins, children of wrath. “*But, God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ*” (2:1, 4-5).

The problem: sin, our separation from God. The solution: God's grace and mercy enacted in the faithfulness of Jesus all the way to death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8). That is the mystery Paul speaks of in this letter. Who could have imagined such a thing? God a man? God on a cross? But now the mystery has been unveiled. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that Paul leans into the glories of God's grace in 2:9-10. But what is it that Paul means by “grace”?

Grace, the path out of the darkness

Grace is the unmerited favor that God pours out on us and the unmerited favor that we pour out on one another. “Favor” speaks of a kindness, a blessing, a forgiving, looking the other way when a person makes a mistake or speaks harshly. “Unmerited” speaks of something that is neither earned nor deserved but is merely a gift, with no strings attached, given by God to us or by us to one another.

Sadly, we seem to live in a world that has forgotten the essential role that grace plays in all relationships. I came across this in a brief essay about the “cancel culture,” in which people are banned from society for saying something objectionable or offensive.

And it's hard to shake the feeling that part of what's involved in cancel culture is a breakdown in personal charity. The idea that someone should be expunged from society for holding controversial (or, frankly, even objectionable) ideas can have troublesome implications. We are all of us flawed people, and part of living in brotherhood with others involves trying to see the virtues in others — to not let errors obscure the personhood of another.¹

The loss of grace, aka “charity,” is one of many tragic symptoms of the breakdown in our culture. But before we turn to the grace that we ought to bestow on one another, let's consider the grace that God pours out on us. Understanding the depth of grace that God gives us all has to begin with grasping the darkness, the sin, in our fallen human nature. If we can't be honest about this, there is really no point in going on.

Yes, we are sinners . . . there is something wrong with us all!

A few years ago, I brought you a quote from a column by Peggy Noonan; it bears repeating. In a column marking the centenary of the beginning of the First World War, Noonan wrote this for the Wall Street Journal²:

Once a few years ago a reporter who had covered wars talked about this with a brilliant, accomplished, famously leftist editor in New York. At the end of a conversation on a recent conflict the reporter said, quizzically: "Why is there so much war? Why do we do that?"

"Because something's wrong with us," the editor replied.

I told him it was the best definition of original sin I'd ever heard.

That's it in a nutshell. There is something wrong with us. Every one of us. All of humanity. We Christians put a name to it, original sin, but that is merely a label. The truth we proclaim, and which has been self-evident over the course of human history, is that there is something wrong us, something that we cannot fix, eradicate, or repair. It is as if we have flaw in our “moral DNA” that no amount of training, education, effort, or good intentions can overcome.

Yet countless people persist in the belief that deep down they are really ok, a good person, someone who can use some help and guidance, but, really, all right. And certainly, good enough for God to embrace us just as we are. But that's a lie, grounded in self-delusion. And it blinds us to the gift of grace that God gives us all.

This self-delusion is growing at a fast pace across the national landscape. Talk to youth and young adults about their beliefs, and you are likely to discover that they have little sense that there is something deeply and desperately wrong with humanity, and certainly not with themselves. This loss of the knowledge of Sin³ is undercutting all our efforts to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, I have been convinced for some time that this loss of the knowledge of Sin is the single greatest obstacle to the growth of Christianity in America. The Good News is good news only if it is delivered in response to bad news. Otherwise, it is heard as Good Advice about how we can straighten up our lives or become better people. And no one gets too excited about good advice, much less follows it. Thus, the indifference that American teenagers demonstrate toward Christianity isn't surprising. Kenda Creasy Dean on the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion:

The good news is that teenagers are not hostile toward religion. . . . Teenagers tend to view God as either a butler or a therapist, someone who meets their needs when summoned (“a cosmic lifeguard,” as one youth minister put it) or who listens

¹ By Fred Bauer, on the National Review website, September 25, 2019.

² Peggy Noonan, “The World the Great War Swept Away,” *The Wall Street Journal*, (August 8, 2014)

³ I capitalize “Sin” here to emphasize that I'm not referring to all the individual wrongs we commit, but the universal flaw in humanity's “moral DNA,” this darkness that lies in the human heart. John the Baptist looked at Jesus and exclaimed, “Behold, the lamb of God that takes away the sin (singular) of the world.”

nonjudgmentally and helps youth feel good about themselves (“kind of like my guidance counselor,” a ninth grader told me). . . .

The bad news is the reason teenagers are not hostile toward religion: they just do not care about it very much. Religion is not a big deal to them. People fight over things that matter to them—but religion barely causes a ripple in the lives of most adolescents. Butlers and lifeguards watch from the sidelines until called upon; therapists and guidance counselors offer encouragement and advice. . . . Teenagers gladly grant people the right to explore other religions, or to construct their own eclectic spiritualities, but they are not doing it themselves. So while religion is seldom a source of conflict for teenagers, it is also seldom a source of identity⁴

The Good News of Grace

In a culture that has lost the knowledge of Sin, Jesus can seem like an answer in search of a problem, a cure in need of an illness. But losing the knowledge of Sin makes Sin no less real. There has always been something wrong with us and there still is. Any objective look at the last century reveals that our scientific and technological advances have left human Sin untouched.

So yes, Jesus is the answer to the most real problem of all. We are in desperate need of rescue and we will never accomplish this ourselves. But God has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God has rescued us through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

There is no other answer, no other solution. Rescue cannot be had by any other means. There is no other path, no other route. In Jesus, God has done for us what must be done and what we would never do. This is genuinely Good News, this gift called grace, not merely great advice about how to love more or become a better person.

Paul saw this clearly and spoke forcefully of it to the churches in western Asia Minor. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (2:8-9). This is so counter-cultural in our world, that we have to keep returning to it again and again. We are lost and we cannot rescue ourselves; our only hope lies in a savior, the Savior. There is a real challenge here, which Jeff Paschal points out to preachers:

The congregation is also likely to be challenged when Paul writes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” This is fundamental Pauline theology, but it goes against what many Christians of our time actually believe and practice. Some Christians believe and practice a form of Pelagianism—a fearful hope that they are reconciled with God by their good works. Other Christians believe and practice a form of Semi-Pelagianism based on the anxious hope of being reconciled with God by having *enough* faith. Instead, Paul declares the strong, joyous word that we are saved by faith (not good works) and faith itself is a gift from God the (not something we conjure up on our own). Thanks be to God!⁵

The Wesleys and Grace

John and Charles Wesley understood that it is love and grace that define God, grace being simply love in action. The cross, the sacrifice and faithfulness it embodied, takes us to the heart, the essence, of God. Former UMC Bishop William Willimon wrote:

Both Charles and John felt that experience of the grace of God was at the center of Christian existence. No one preached grace better than John; no one sang about grace better than Charles. . . . Admittedly, our Wesleyan emphasis on love and grace

⁴ Dean, Kenda Creasy (2010-06-12). *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Kindle Locations 333-347). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Jeff Paschal, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B*, 2008, 2, 111–113.

can be perverted into a kind of mushy, all-affirming inclusiveness, open to everything and rejecting nothing. This is certainly not true of Wesley and is not true of us United Methodists at our best.

And, so we, like John and Charles Wesley, reach upward and embrace the grace God pours out on us. As Paul writes, we put away our former way of life and are renewed in the spirit of our minds, clothing ourselves with our new selves, which are created anew in the likeness of God, in genuine righteousness and holiness (4:23-25). All the time, we know it is not our doing that brings us all to such rescue, rather, it is God's gift to us, the most wonderful gift any of us will ever be given.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

A study of the book of Exodus

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Jude

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Current series: *Contending for the Faith in the Age of Nones*

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.