

I

Today we wrap up our read through the Book of Ephesians. And as we've said all along, isn't a book at all in the traditional sense of the word, but rather a letter, written to the followers of Jesus who lived in and around the city of Ephesus sometime in the late first century of the common era.

When we read letters, it's kind of like we're coming into a room and listening in on one end of a conversation that's already been in progress for a while. So in order to help us get a better sense of the whole conversation, some reminders are in order.

Ephesus was an important commercial and political center in what is now modern-day Turkey, but in the first century, Ephesus was a thoroughly Roman city. Most of the people of Ephesus worshiped many gods and goddesses. In fact, one of the civic points of pride in Ephesus was an enormous statue in the city of the Greek goddess Artemis.

And so much of the first half of the letter was concerned with issues of their religious identity. The writer reminds the Ephesians that once, they were a people cut off from God and without hope, but in Christ, God has adopted them and reconciled them to God and to one another. Most of the first half of the letter is centered on what God has done for the Ephesians, and by extension, for us.

But now that we are well into the second half of the letter, the content has shifted – from what God has done for us in Jesus Christ – to what we should do and how we should live in response.

So now I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Ephesians 5:15-20.

15 Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, 16 making the most of the time, because the days are evil. 17 So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, 20 giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Understand what the will of the Lord is.

II

For a minute, I want us to back up a bit in the biblical story, way back, all the way back to the book of Genesis.

Right after we read the stories about the creation and the flood and the ark and the tower of babel - all the stories our ancestors in faith tell about God and humans and their pondering

about how the world came to be as it is, suddenly there's a big shift in the narrative.

The narrative shifts from the grand and cosmic to the granular, to this one particular man named Abram and his wife Sarai.

And we read in Genesis 12 and following that there was once this man named Abram who was married to a woman named Sarai. All we know about them is that they're 75 years old, and they've never been able to conceive and bear a child.

But out of the blue, God calls to this couple and God says, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will bless you and make your name great, and in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed."

Abram and Sarai weren't more pious or faithful than any other couple. They weren't smarter or more attractive or wiser than anyone else. They certainly weren't spring chickens anymore. But God called them. God called them and commissioned them and sent them and blessed them.

But there was a larger purpose behind all that calling and commissioning and sending and blessing. God blessed Abram and Sarai so that in and through them, in and through their descendants, *all* the families of the earth might be blessed.

If there's a thesis statement for the whole biblical story, I think that's it

right there. The entire rest of the Hebrew Scriptures are more or less about how the mission that God declares right there in Genesis 12 is going to be carried out. Sometimes it will happen because of the faithfulness of Abram and Sarai and their descendants, who we come to know by the name Israelites. But often, God's mission carries forward in spite of them.

But in any case, that's what God is about in the world. God's mission, God's will, God's desire, to bring about the blessing of all the families of the earth. And in order to accomplish this mission, for reasons passing understanding, God chooses to work in and through this one particular family, even with all its quirks and quarrels.

When we turn to the gospels, we learn that in Jesus, the covenant with Abram and Sarai is not replaced or superceded, but rather expanded.

And that's what was happening in Ephesus. Most of the followers of Jesus there were Gentiles that is, they were women and men who were raised outside of first century Judaism. They had not grown up learning the stories of the Hebrew bible. They knew nothing of Abram and Sarai or Moses and Zipporah or David and Bathsheba or the priests and the prophets.

But nevertheless, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they too were coming to believe that this Galilean Jew named Jesus of Nazareth was not just another prophet, not just another moral teacher, not just another revolutionary, but that

Jesus was and is the Christ – the Messiah – the one to whom the Hebrew Scriptures point, the in whom all of human history and all of human destiny are somehow tied together.

And so the writer of Ephesians reminds them that they know what the will of the Lord is. As he puts it to them, God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and on earth.”

That’s what God is up to in the world. The blessing of all the families of the earth. The gathering up of all things in him, things in heaven and on earth in the fulness of time.

III

But let’s talk about you, my friend. You have a vital role to play in what God is up to in the world. God has claimed you and marked you and redeemed you, not because of anything you did or didn’t do, not because of anything you said or didn’t say, but simply because you belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to God through Jesus Christ.

Once you were cut off from God and without hope, but in Christ you have been adopted and made an heir of God’s promise, and there is nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor anything in all creation that can ever separate you from

the love of God made known to you in Jesus Christ.

You have been saved. You have been redeemed.

But that’s only part of the story. You have received grace upon grace, not just for your salvation in the hereafter, but so that you might play a role in what God is up to in the here and now. You have been saved, you have been redeemed, to participate in God’s mission in the world.

And here’s the thing. God knows you. God knows your limitations. God knows your struggles with sin. God knows you better than you know yourself.

Abram and Sarai said, “We’re too old to have a family. We’re too old to be of use to anyone.” They didn’t tell God anything God didn’t already know. And yet God worked in and through them to carry out God’s purpose of making a covenant people.

Moses said, “I’m no good in front of a crowd. The words get all mixed up and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. Oh, and by the way, I’m on the run from a murder charge.”

Moses didn’t tell God anything God didn’t already know. And yet God worked in and through Moses to lead God’s people out of slavery and into freedom.

Esther said, “I’m just a young girl. Why would the king listen to what I have to say?” But she wasn’t telling God

anything God didn't already know. And yet God worked in and through her to keep God's people from being annihilated.

Over and over in the Scriptures God works in and through ordinary people, people just like you and me, people with limitations and hang-ups and every excuse in the book, and still, God works in and through them to carry out God's mission in the world.

And my friend, God wants to work in and through you. Sometime this week, you will have an opportunity to be an agent of God's blessing. Sometime this week, you will have an opportunity to be an ambassador of Christ's peace.

And so the writer of Ephesians says, "Be careful, then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil."

One way to read this sounds like a warning about a coming judgment. Be careful how you live in these evil days! The end is coming! It reminds me of one of my favorite bumper stickers that simply reads, "Jesus is coming. Look busy."

But a better way to read this, I think, is something like, "Don't live an unexamined life. Don't just roll from one day to the next. Make the most of the time that you have, and use that time to understand and participate in what God is doing in the world."

V

Make the most of the time.

I keep thinking about all of the pictures we've seen coming back from the James Webb Space Telescope in recent days, and about how long the light from all those far away galaxies has been traveling across the universe. And I keep thinking about how in the grand scheme of God's creation, our time to live, our time to advance God's mission of blessing all the families of the earth is so very, very, very short.

So let us live carefully. Let live wisely, making the most of the time in these trying days.

Let us put away bitterness and enmity and slander and malice and strife, and instead be filled the Spirit.

And let us give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the one to whom the Hebrew Scriptures point, the one to whom the gospels testify, the one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny come together.

Thanks be to God. Amen.