

The New Generation Community - Vision

This is the first of a series based on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The term "New Generation Community" comes from our vision statement "To raise up a new generation that will change our city". It is easy to misread this vision statement and just hear "to change our city" or "a young generation will change our city" and feel "I cannot do it" or "that does not involve me because I am not young. Look at it again. Our goal is "to raise up". Who do we raise up? "a new generation that will change our city". Whatever our age or state of health we can pray and work to raise up people who will change our city. Some of us may be actively part of changing the city and some may not be able to but we can all be part of "raising up a new generation" – providing we have vision. Vision is our theme.

Vision is so important. I expect many of us started our Christian lives with passion to serve Jesus because we were so excited to have our sins forgiven. But over the years the emotion that gave us that passion has died down and we have settled down into a routine of attending Christian meetings, watching Christian TV and listening to Christian radio. In order to keep our passion alive we need vision. And we need to be able to transfer that vision to the new generation who will change our city.

My life changed on a weekend in February 1970 when I heard a series of talks on God's eternal purpose. For forty years the understanding I got then has provided the main motivation for my life. We are going to learn what is on God's heart. We are going to hear his vision. I pray the Holy Spirit will make it your vision also.

The passage we are going to study is Ephesians chapter 1 v 3-14. In Greek these verses are one sentence but we are going to divide them up so that we can better understand what Paul was writing. I want you to keep in mind as we study that Paul is describing two aspects of God's plan: a primary one, which I shall call God's eternal plan, and a secondary one, which I shall call God's salvation plan.

Before we look at what Paul wrote, let remind ourselves of the background to this letter. Ephesus was one of the biggest towns in the Roman Empire and was situated on the west coast of Turkey. Paul spent two years teaching the church there. He wrote this letter a few years later in about 60 AD while he was in prison awaiting trial before the Emperor Nero. In contrast to many churches there were not big problems in Ephesus, so Paul could concentrate on broadening the spiritual understanding of the church instead of having to correct its faults. This is why the Letter to the Ephesians is one of the most encouraging and positive letters he wrote.

Let's begin with verse 3:

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Paul praises the One who is both the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ because of the tremendous blessings we have been given. Remember the inauguration of President Obama. The wife and children were standing there with him and sharing in all the honor he received because they belong to his family.

Jesus is the one who deserves all the spiritual blessings in heaven, not we. But the amazing truth is that we share the spiritual blessings Jesus has earned because we are part of God's family. That is why we must be in Christ i.e. in relationship with him. So how can we become part of the family with Jesus? Verses 4-8 tell us:

⁴For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

Before the universe was made God had already planned that we should be included in His family with Jesus. Thus we will share in the spiritual blessings he planned for Jesus. When God made Adam and Eve he gave them a choice – to be part of God's family or be independent. They chose independence. Sin entered the world and they were excluded from God's family.

I have tried to illustrate this in a picture. God's plan for Jesus, his eternal purpose, is represented by the line at the top that begins in Eden with the two trees and goes up to the New heaven and New Earth with the one Tree of Life. However, because of sin, people fell down from that purpose.

Did this stop God's eternal plan? No, because God already had a plan to deal with sin. He gave his eternal Son to die as a sacrifice for our sins and bring us back into his eternal plan. The cross was the turning point in human history as the picture shows. If we trust that Jesus' death paid the price for our sins, we are forgiven and we are made part of God's family and brought back into his eternal purpose.

If you have never trusted Jesus to save you from your sins, do it now. Ask someone to pray with you.

Many Christians think that God's eternal plan is to save people. This focuses our attention on what God can do for us. Our prayers become focused on God meeting our needs. When things don't work out for us as we expect, we complain or lose faith. Once we understand that God has a plan for Jesus, it changes our perspective and our prayers. Our focus now becomes on wanting his plan to succeed and asking what we can do to be part of it. Jesus told us "Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven and all the things you need will be given to you". God's salvation plan allows us a second chance to be included in his eternal plan. What then is His eternal plan?

⁹And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

God has planned that Jesus will be the leader of every one and everything in heaven and on earth. At present he is the leader in heaven because everyone there does his will. But on earth the majority of people do not obey him and whether they know it or not their real leader is Satan. At present only a minority of people on earth has Jesus

as their leader. That is why Jesus told us to pray that God's will be done on earth as it is already being done in heaven. Each time someone becomes a follower of Jesus a little bit of that prayer is answered. This prayer will be fully answered when Jesus comes back to earth and establishes God's kingdom here. We who are now followers of Jesus will then become assistant leaders with him. This will be true for both Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus as the next verses tell us.

¹¹In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹²in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.

In verse 12 when Paul writes "we" he means Jews and in verse 13 when he writes "you" he means Gentiles. But, how do we know we have become part of God's family? Paul tells us:

Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

The Holy Spirit in our lives is the proof that we have been included in the family of God. The Holy Spirit is God's label on us to show we belong to him. We receive the Holy Spirit by faith but He should not remain just something we believe in. He needs to become part of our experience. If you have not experienced the Holy Spirit in your life, pray and get others to pray for you until you do know him in your experience. There are several examples in the New Testament of believers who had not experienced the Holy Spirit until someone prayed for them. Then they were filled with the Spirit and experienced a new power and joy in their Christian lives. We all need that.

Let's now go back to verse 10

to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ

"What it will be like when God's purpose is being fulfilled and Jesus is leader of everything in heaven and on earth?"

The majority of Christians think that they have been saved to go to heaven. It is true that if a Christian dies he will go to heaven, but only temporarily. It is not true that when Jesus comes back he is going to take us to heaven so that we can be there forever and have a wonderful holiday. Paul writing to the Thessalonians clearly shows that when Jesus comes back he will bring the dead Christians with him from heaven. After we have all met in the clouds we will come back to the earth with Jesus.

When Jesus returns he will be welcomed by the Jews in Jerusalem saying "Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord". Jesus will establish his headquarters in Jerusalem. That is why the Devil is so desperately trying to stop the Jewish people having control of Jerusalem. He wants to prevent Jesus coming back to a Jewish Jerusalem.

Do you realize there has already been a time when the resurrected Jesus lived on earth? This was the 40 days between his resurrection and ascension. Jesus had a new body in which he could go anywhere he liked, and it will be the same when he comes back again. You might be in your apartment with the door locked and suddenly Jesus is standing in the room. You are out for a walk with friends and suddenly Jesus joins you. You are out fishing and Jesus is there to cook breakfast for you.

In addition, all of us who trust in Jesus will have the same type of body as he has. Imagine what it will be like to have a body that never dies, never gets sick or weary and can instantly go anywhere you choose!

When Jesus rules on earth, his followers with their new bodies will be spiritually connected to Jesus and each other through the Holy Spirit in a much clearer way than now. We will know the mind of Christ and we will have a greater power of the Spirit to heal and do miracles. That is why these deeds are called signs of the Kingdom. There will be no evil desires in us to block the flow of the Holy Spirit in us. We will be able to perfectly obey God's will on earth as it is now being obeyed in heaven.

What will the earth be like when Jesus comes back? Will it become perfect instantly? I don't think so. In the Bible the book of Revelation tells us that before Jesus returns the world will be a terrible mess. I think there is going to be a lot of work to do to get the world cleaned up and bring healing to the people who have survived the reign of antichrist. Jesus and his followers will be leading this work. The Bible tells in Revelation 20 and 1 Cor. 15 that it will take a thousand years before everything is exactly as Jesus wants. Only after that will the New Heavens and New Earth be created.

We have all see on the news the terrible earthquake in Haiti. Who was sent first to Haiti after the earthquake? Only people trained and prepared. Jesus tells us that only those who have developed their skills now will be qualified to serve in the new kingdom. Many Christians will not be qualified for more than very small tasks because they never used the time now to prepare and learn. Their faith may have saved them but because they were just passive Christians they won't be much use in the kingdom.

Our vision "to raise up a new generation that will change our city" prepares the way for the coming of the kingdom and provides a framework within which we can develop the skills we will need to serve Jesus in his kingdom. Attending church meetings is good but we need more than listening to sermons to discover and develop our gifts.

If you are not part of a small group then you need to join one because you cannot change the city alone and you need other to help you discover and develop your gifts. Become part of a small group and start thinking, praying and discussing together what you can do to change the city or how you can support others to do that. When the Holy Spirit gives you a practical project, come and share your ideas with the church leaders so that we can advise and support you. Together we can make a change in this city. We can lead people to Jesus. We can make Jesus a subject people are talking about. We can speak for and support the poor and those in need. In the future let it be

said that people in Turku Free Church shared God's heart and made a difference to the life of people in this city, and we were part of it.

Let's all stand and ask the Holy Spirit to empower us for this great task.

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