

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

January 25, 2015



(grace) the stuff of life

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Discussion Guide

A Life Transformed by Grace

Ephesians 1.3-6; Ezekiel 36.25-27

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Do you think it is really possible for anyone to change? Would you explain?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Read Ephesians 1.3-6 aloud slowly. Pause, and then read the text once more aloud, slowly.
- According to Paul, what praiseworthy things has God done? Seek to find as many as possible.
- What might be the implications of these actions of God?
- Simply put, Paul states that God has decided that we should be like him (blameless) and with him (sons). What expectations, if any, do people have about what this looks like and how it is to come about?
- Do you feel that reality matches these expectations? Would you elaborate?

- How do people typically respond when reality doesn't meet the expectations? What effects does this have upon the Church?
- Many people feel that because God has decided that people should be like him that it just happens, instantly. However, Ezekiel details how God works to bring about change in the lives of his people. Read Ezekiel 36.25-27.
- How does Ezekiel describe the transforming work of God? In what ways, if any, is this description similar or dissimilar to the way we expect God to work? What might be some practical implications for the way the Church functions today?
- If the work of transformation is a work of grace, then our role is to open our lives to this grace. What might this look like for you? What, if anything, keeps you from opening to God's grace in this way?
- Conclude with prayer, asking God to grant his grace freely so that each person present might open themselves more fully to the work God desires to do in each of them.

Context and Background

Election

The topic of election is perhaps one of the most divisive theological concepts within modern Christianity. However, the topic itself need not be one of division but one which can provide comfort to the believer, for it is one which emphasizes grace.

In classical usage, election is the idea that a person is chosen or picked out for a special purpose or role. This idea appears in the Old Testament with the choosing of David to be Israel's king (1 Samuel 16.7-12) and the choosing of Abraham's descendants to be God's people (Deuteronomy 4.37; 1 Kings 3.8; Isaiah 44.1-2; Amos 3.2). In the Old Testament, election is always rooted in God's sovereign choice, expressed in his covenantal love.

Particularly in Ephesians 1, Paul teaches that those people who make up the Church do so only because of the sovereign choice of God (Ephesians 1.4); that is, salvation comes at God's choosing. This is not a surprising thought because on our own, humanity has no desire to pursue God (Romans 3.10-11).

Therefore, God's direct intervention is necessary to turn people's hearts to himself in faith (Ephesians 2.8-9). Thus, election is the idea that salvation is made possible by God's own sovereign action and not our own. What becomes divisive is the Reformed doctrine of double election or predestination which states that because God has chosen some to experience salvation he has likewise chosen some to experience damnation; that is, God intentionally sends some people to Hell. This doctrine lends itself to a corollary doctrine that Jesus' atoning work on the cross was limited to a few. While these are logical corollaries to the concept of election, they smack against the plain teaching of Scripture which states that God does not desire that any perish (2 Peter 3.9) and that Jesus died for all people (John 3.16). However, this calls into question the very nature of how election works. If God has chosen some for salvation, then what of his desire that none should perish?

Those who emphasize freewill claim that God's election is for those who freely choose him, but this does not fit with the Scripture emphasis that our choosing rests in God's choosing of us first. In the end, the idea of election is one that remains a mystery. We may affirm that our salvation rests upon God's sovereign choosing and that he is at work in us to bring about the fullness of this salvation. In this, we rest and find comfort. How this election works out among those who have not yet responded to Christ is beyond the scope of our understanding and beyond our role to determine. Rather, we hold out the hope of the gospel to all people.

The Text

Ephesians 1.3-6: *God decided*

After Paul's opening words, the letter of Ephesians contains an extended blessing (Ephesians 1.3-11) which in many ways outlines Paul's purposes within the letter. Paul intends his letter to the Ephesian believers to describe God's actions in the person of Christ for the purpose of bringing about the redemption of those who make up the Church. Paul begins his blessing by noting that the God who is the Father of Jesus is worthy of praise. He is worthy of praise because, in Jesus, he has blessed those who make up the Church with every spiritual blessing from the heavenly realms. The mention of spiritual blessings is not opposed to physical blessings but is rather a statement of origin. These blessings come from God himself and have their origin from the highest place of power, Heaven. They are actualized in the person of Jesus.

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These blessings begin with God's sovereign choosing of those who make up the Church before time. (See Election.) His choosing was to decide that those chosen would be like him, holy and blameless. While some might claim that Paul is referring to the heavenly state of believers—one day we will be holy—Paul's letter does not support this argument as holiness is to begin with life today (Ephesians 4.1). In fact, God's desire is always that his people might live clean lives (Philippians 2.15; Leviticus 11.44). Not only has God chosen that his people be holy and blameless, but, in Christ, he has chosen that they be part of his family as children. This is God's desire, something which gives him pleasure.

Paul notes that God has decided that those who are part of the Church should be like him and with him. These ideas are wonderful to envision but difficult to imagine when we consider the nature of our daily lives (Ephesians 2.1-3). However, God does not leave us on our own to become blameless and pure, but he makes all of this possible by freely granting his grace through Jesus.

Ezekiel 36.25-27: *From the Inside Out*

The prophecies of Ezekiel were penned to the people of Israel while they lived in captivity in Babylon. These prophecies are filled with messages of hope of God's coming restoration of his people. In Ezekiel 36, the prophet details that the people of Israel will once again dwell in the land of Israel and that the land will be fruitful (Ezekiel 36.1-15). However, the problem of the behavior of Israel remains. Even though they would return to their land, their hearts were bent away from God toward conduct which was unclean (Ezekiel 36.16-21). If they were to remain in the land, something needed to be done with their behavior and its cause. Rather than simply telling the people of Israel to "straighten up," God promised to do a work which would reorient the Israelites, a work which would begin on the inside and work its way out. God promised that he would sprinkle the Israelites clean. The imagery is of a ceremonial washing. This cleansing would remove the impurities and their source, the bent toward things other than God. Interestingly, Paul echoes this same language in Ephesians 5.26-27 when he speaks of the cleansing work of Christ. This cleansing would not be a divine "zapping" but would begin at the very core of the Israelites as

God gave them new hearts and a new spirit. In the ancient world, the heart was not the seat of emotion but the source of the will. The spirit was almost synonymous but carried with it the idea of that part of the being which empowered the limbs; that is, the spirit enabled the body to do what the heart desired. God states plainly that he would give the Israelites a heart which was alive (flesh) and a spirit (his own) which would direct and empower them to actually live as God desired. Interestingly, this is all the work of God on behalf of the Israelites, an act of grace.

Real life with Blake:

In Christ, God has delivered me from a life of sin. This does not just have future implications. It has present implications. God does not desire to leave me in a life of disobedience and ignorance because such a life kills me. He longs for me to be like him and to be with him. He wants me to live a life which is blameless and pure as one of his sons. He doesn't just long for it, but he has decided that this is the way it will be. Sounds great! Seems impossible. When I try to live in a way that fits with God's desires (Ephesians 4.1), I often find I come up short. It isn't that I don't want to. It is just that I don't have it in me. I have engrained ways of being that I just can't drop. I have reactions to people which I just can't seem to stop. I act before I think. I continue to think and act in ways even though I know I shouldn't. So much of the time it seems impossible to live as God has called me to live. Sometimes I wonder if God even expects it of me, but then I remember that God has already decided that this is the way it will be.

God has decided, and because God has decided I am not on my own. God will make sure that what he has decided comes to pass. He will move to accomplish his desire. He will accomplish an act of grace. He makes what he desires possible through Christ, the way of grace. God's grace meets me where I am and cleanses me, but it goes further. God's grace continues to pour into my life, changing me at the depths of my being, bringing about new desires and new attitudes. God's grace continues to pour into my life, changing me at the depths of my being, bringing about new desires and new attitudes. God's grace then fills me with his Spirit, empowering me to act on what he has placed in my heart so that I actually begin to do what he calls me to do. As I open to God's grace I discover that it really is possible to leave behind a life of sin and to take up the life of Christ, possible only because of grace.

Real life with you:

How do we change? This is one of the most difficult questions we face as followers of Christ. Jesus desires that we change. In fact, God has decided that we must change. Before the world began God decided that we would be changed to be like him (holy) and that we would be with him (sons). When it comes down to it, the reality is that change is hard. It is hard to change. We have lived so long by our own means and according to our own devices that at best change is difficult and at worst we simply do not want to change. Much of the time, when we finally decide that we must change, we attempt to do so and fail. We say, "I will never do that again," only to discover that we just did. We begin to think that change is impossible in this life, something reserved for the moment we step into God's presence in Heaven, but this is not what God desires. God desires that we change to be like him and with him, starting now. He has decided it. Because he decided it, he has made it possible. In Christ, he begins a work which starts on the inside and works its way out. He gives us new desires and the strength to act on those desires. He does this not because we deserve it and not because we earned it. He does this because he decided it and it makes him happy. This makes the changing of our persons an act of God's grace.

This week, consider the areas of your life which have been resistant to change. As you consider these areas, think about God's great desire for these areas to change. Think for a moment about how God has given enough grace for these areas to be changed, changed in a way that is lasting, from the inside out. Take some time and pray for God to do what only he can do in you, and ask him what he would desire you to do to open your life to his transforming grace.



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