

At first this might not seem to be much of a scripture to preach from but it is the introduction of a letter by the Apostle Paul to the church at Ephesus. Contained within these few words are a lot that can point us in the right direction in these days.

*This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.
I am writing to God's holy people in Ephesus, who are faithful followers of Christ Jesus.*
Ephesians 1:1 NLT

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 1:1 NKJV

If you were to study the word environment or define it you would find that it was derived from Latin and French and means simply, “that which surrounds.” Let me try to illustrate how we are going to dissect this simple opening verse of scripture. What was he really trying to say? Is it just a simple greeting to a letter or is there more that we can infer and use to help us set or stay the course of our Christian life?

Let us imagine for a few moments that we are traveling on the biggest commercial airliner. The Airbus A380 is a double-deck, wide-body, four-engine jet airliner manufactured by Airbus. It is the world's largest passenger airliner, and many airports have upgraded facilities to accommodate its size.

The A380's upper deck extends along the entire length of the fuselage, and provides seating for 525 people in a typical three-class configuration or up to 853 people in an all-economy class configuration.

Around you is the plane itself carrying you to your destination. You are surrounded by your fellow passengers who let us imagine are all headed to the same place that you are. There is one more environment around you and that is the airspace outside the plane which represents a lot of power to get into in the first place and to cut through in a safe manner. The most resistance comes from outside the plane and in fact could be your largest threat to not reaching your destination.

Now let's look at these three simple explanation and definitions of environment and lay them alongside our text for a moment. What we find is a pattern for understanding the truth as seen in the words of the Apostle Paul.

He says that he is writing to those who are “in Christ Jesus.” For Christians and disciples this is our closest environment that we live in. He also says that he is writing to the “holy people of God,” or “the saints.” Here is the second environment through which we live out our lives. We are to live in the community of faith. But there is one more reference and that is found in the location and destination of Paul's letter. These Christians were living in Ephesus which as we will see was a place of extreme pressure and enticement.

So then, here is where we are going. Christians are to live in Christ their closest environment. We are to be in fellowship or community with those around us. Some have said we are to do life together but whatever you call it, it is an extremely clearly taught principle of the Bible. We need each other. And of course these Christians were living in Ephesus with its peculiar evils but all of us are surrounded by a culture that surrounds us with its evils, disciplines us with its temptations and challenges us with its paganism.

In other words, we live in three worlds.

Let's look at them closely for a few minutes.

1. We are called to live in Christ: The dawn of our faith

You may ask someone if they are in business and they will surely answer you without hesitation. You can ask if he or she is in one of the professions and they will answer you with an even more defined answer. You can ask if they are in love and they will answer you with glowing words of affirmation and little hesitation. But ask the average man or woman if they are in Christ and they will be mystified by the question.

The interesting thing about that is the early Christians were completely at home with the phrase "in Christ Jesus," and used it frequently. In fact in the epistles of the Apostle Paul, this phrase appears 164 times. Here is an example of how he used it and what it means:

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NKJV

The Apostle Paul knew what it meant to not live in Christ as much as he knew what it meant to live in Christ. Once he was simply religious and trying his best to work his way to heaven ironically by killing early Christians but then something happened.

Then the light dawned!

One day on a road called Damascus a man named Saul encountered a flaming insight that the way to start a new life was by turning over everything to Jesus Christ. It dawned on him decisively that the way to be saved was not the struggle of precepts, politics, programs or performance but rather a personal communion with a personal Christ in which he furnished the surrender and Christ furnished the strength.

While Jesus changed Saul's name to Paul he was forevermore to be "in Christ."

Paul wrote much of the New Testament. He was transformed from persecutor to pastor in the pastoral letters he wrote he included these words:

We put no confidence in human effort, ⁴ though I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!

⁵ I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. ⁶ I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

⁷ I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. ⁸ Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ ⁹ and become one with Him. Philippians 3-9 NLT

A woman entered into Christ and had this dawning at the age of 80. Four years later she attempted to write a little poetry.

*If you ask me how long I have lived in the world, I'm old, I'm very old.
If you ask me how long I have truly lived, twill very soon be told;
Past eighty years of age, yet only four years old.*

Being in Christ is the first and most important world you can live in. Have you made that decision in your life and are you following through and living in Christ?

In January 1985, a large suitcase, unmarked and unclaimed, was discovered at the customs office at Los Angeles International Airport. When U.S. Customs agents opened the suitcase, they found the curled-up body of an unidentified young woman.

She had been dead for a few days, according to the county coroner. As the investigation continued, it was learned that the woman was the wife of a young Iranian living in the U.S. Unable to obtain a visa to enter the U.S. and join her husband, she took matters into her own hands and attempted to smuggle herself into America via an airplane's cargo bay. While her plan seemed to her simple though risky, officials were hard pressed to understand how such an attempt could ever succeed. Even if she survived the journey in the cargo bay, she would remain an illegal alien, having entered through improper channels.

Some people believe they'll enter the kingdom of God on their own since they've been reasonably good citizens or church attendee's. But entry plans of our own design prove not only foolish but fatal.

You can't get to heaven on your own. You have to be in Christ.

2. We are called to live in community:

The development of our faith

This is the second world that Christians must embrace and live in. In one translation we read these words: "*To the saints*" And in another it said, "*To God's Holy people in Ephesus.*" In

studying for this message I learned an interesting fact. That very rarely in the Bible is the word “saint,” ever singular. It almost always includes the body of Christ or the church. While it was popular in the first century and in the middle ages for a man or woman to go off and do self-imposed and lonely exiles to be able to qualify as a saint. The original Christian churches, as portrayed in the Holy Scriptures, never once speaks of this as a good idea or suggest that we go off into seclusion or isolation from the people of God.

It is good to sometimes go away for spiritual retreat but for the most part the scripture teaches us that Christian community is vital and really not optional.

We are going to have to make some adjustments as a church that I think will help us in the future to be more like Christ. In this day of church shoppers and consumerism it is important to take care of each other. I’ve been thinking a lot about our church and the different ages of people that are here. I’ve been thinking about how the Bible instructs us to take care of each other. We are told in the Bible to take care of widows, we are told to take care of children and orphans. We are instructed to show compassion one for the other.

In the early days of the church people did life together connected by their faith in Jesus Christ. They formed their communities around worship and compassion for others. Within these fellowships they learned to sing together, whether in the temple or the open air, and they prayed together prayers of earnestness and devotion. They shared in one another’s problems and took on the responsibility of the church family together.

What about us today? We have much finer facilities than the early church could have imagined. We have comfort and in some cases luxury in our buildings. But how well do we attend our services. Listen the notion that going to church is driving to the church finding a parking spot, finding a seat, watching the performance and going home only pausing to say hi to a person or two that you may know was never in the notion of being the church that Jesus had in mind. Never.

Can I just stop and teach a little? Churches often develop cultures and sometimes they are good sometimes not. Sometimes our weaknesses can get lost in the consistency of what we do. What do you do when you come to church or attend a church sponsored event? Do you just talk to people you know? Do you ever engage or even greet people you don’t know? As a pastor my heart breaks when I hear of people who come into our church and attend for months and sometimes years without feeling connected to other people.

The most important and effective Christians in this church are not the people who do things on the platform week after week. I’ll tell you who they are; they are the men and women who are sensitive enough and mature enough in their faith to look around each week and try to talk to or help someone that may not be as connected. They may not have a large family coming to the church or a lot of friends or even their life group. They don’t have a life group.

Like Bill Hybels, I believe that there is nothing like the local church when it is working right. In addition, I agree with what he says after that sentence: “Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential is unlimited. It comforts the grieving and heals the broken in the context of community. It builds bridges to seekers and offers truth to the confused. It provides resources for those in need and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden, and the disillusioned. It breaks the chains of addictions, frees the oppressed, and offers belong to the marginalized of this world. Whatever the capacity for human suffering, the church has a greater capacity for healing and wholeness.” Hybels concludes, “Still to this day, the potential of the local church is almost more than I can grasp. No other organization on earth is like the church. Nothing even comes close.”

Francis Schaeffer said, “Our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful.”

3. We are called to live in captivity:

The discipline of our faith

At first you might not like to hear this but to the authentic disciple of Jesus Christ living in this world today and even in America is like living in a strange and hostile place. The Christian life has most generally been lived out in unideal environments. Many times from the earliest days of Christianity being one meant you could die for your beliefs.

Being in Christ doesn't mean living in some ivory tower away from trouble and sorrow.

Living in this world and a culture is like living in captivity. The church at Ephesus faced this daily much like we do. Ephesus was pagan. It was idolatrous. Ephesus was immoral and vulgarly prosperous. Vile sensuality was flaunted in the streets and even winked at in the temple. Yet in the middle of this murky mess of a culture were a group of young Christians learning to live out their faith. If you are wondering how to make it in this kind of environment and how to live in this kind of world let me tell you.

In many ways we are not much different then the Jews throughout the Old Testament. Our current world is not a friend to the church if you believe in absolutes and have the gall to believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven. There is a lot of turbulence out there and it pays us to hang on.

On a commuter flight from Portland, Maine, to Boston, Henry Dempsey, the pilot, heard an unusual noise near the rear of the small aircraft. He turned the controls over to his co-pilot and went back to check it out.

As he reached the tail section, the plane hit an air pocket, and Dempsey was tossed against the rear door. He quickly discovered the source of the mysterious noise. The rear door had not been properly latched prior to takeoff, and it flew open. He was instantly sucked out of the jet.

The co-pilot, seeing the red light that indicated an open door, radioed the nearest airport, requesting permission to make an emergency landing. He reported that the pilot had fallen out of the plane, and he requested a helicopter search of that area of the ocean.

After the plane landed, they found Henry Dempsey holding onto the outdoor ladder of the aircraft. Somehow he had caught the ladder, held on for ten minutes as the plane flew 200 mph at an altitude of 4,000 feet, and then, at landing, kept his head from hitting the runway, which was a mere twelve inches away. It took airport personnel several minutes to pry Dempsey's fingers from the ladder.

Things in life may be turbulent, and you may not feel like holding on. But have you considered the alternative?

Florence Lee Manners was a low classed actress in London's east end. Her father's name she never knew. Her mother had been an actress, performing in the back rooms of the pubs where indecency was given first a high rating. Florence soon became known as a dancer and singer. For a time her conduct was different than her mothers with whom she lived. Her mother was drinking heavily and one night Florence came home dead drunk. They quarreled and her mother disappeared only to be found three days later drowned in the river. That was the beginning of Flo's descent. She knew no boundaries or limits. Eventually she lost her beauty and charm from hard living and she also lost her popularity.

She became a rowdy entertainer of the back room types. Nobody much paid her any attention. One evening when half-drunk she stumbled down the street and on the corner was an open air church service being conducted by the local mission. She stopped to listen, fumbled in her pocket and found a penny and gave it to one of the workers. The worker was a woman of wealth and culture and a devoted follower of Jesus Christ. She accepted the penny and walked away with the drunken girl at her side. They went to the little mission chapel and she stayed with her till she was sober and then she told her with a radiating heart about Christ and His love.

Florence felt its power and responded to the call. She surrendered the shattered pieces of herself to Him. Then came a strange test for faith of those mission workers who had helped her to Christ. She insisted that she had to keep one last engagement. Where? The Tiger Music Room. They were in shock. It was a place of degradation and vileness. But she insisted . . . it came time for her to entertain and dance. Turning to see a man at the piano she told him she would not need his accompaniment. As the patrons jeered and sneered and then it got quiet. There was no dance but in a clear voice she began to sing:

*There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins.
And sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.*

The men in that room were stunned and she quickly sang one more verse before they pushed her from the stage.

*The dying thief rejoiced to see, that fountain in his day
And there may I, though vile as he wash all my sins away.*

It was then the riot started and she quickly made a safe exit from the protesting crowd of leering men. For the rest of her life Florence lived faithfully and served Christ with a new song in her heart. In Christ she found the dawn of life. In the faith community of a little mission she found the support and love she so lived for. And to live in an unfriendly world to grace and goodness she found the ability and discipline to live out her faith until her dying day.

Are you in Christ? Has the light of Christ dawned in your life?

Are you practicing community? Is your faith developing?

Are you persevering through the world? Have you disciplined yourself to do it God's way?

I hope that each of us will take an inventory and answer those questions today.