

God's Love Changes Everything
Text: Ephesians 1:1, Acts 9, various
Title: God's love changes people.
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Welcome! We are getting ready to start a new series today on the book of Ephesians. I am so excited about this series and God has something special in store for us in this book. Whether you have been around this church for decades, or this is your first week here, God has something he wants to teach you, something he wants to shape in you through this book.

- If you are checking church out and you want to learn more about the faith, this study is for you.
- If you want to grow in prayer and personal intimacy with God, in Christian character, this study is for you.
- If you want to see Jesus have a more central role in your marriage and family, in your work life, your friendships, this study is for you.
- If you want to learn about spiritual warfare, this study is for you.

We are going to be in the book of Ephesians for 15 weeks. We are going to see God's word speak to so many different areas of our life, and here's the central theme for the entire study: **God's love changes everything!**

Let's go ahead and jump into **1:1**. Here is how Ephesians begins. **Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.** Before we go any further, we need to take some time and talk about **Paul**, the man who wrote this letter. We are told that he was an **apostle**, which means that he was personally selected by Jesus Christ, and sent on a mission to teach the gospel to those who had never met Jesus. As an apostle, Paul traveled all over the Mediterranean world, planting churches, writing 13 books that have made it into the Bible, more than anyone else, including this book that we are studying today. After Jesus himself, Paul has had by far and away the greatest impact on Christianity in all of history. But here's the thing - if you knew this man early on in his life, you would have never guessed that! To begin with, his name wasn't Paul, early, that's not the name he was given at birth. When he was born, his parents named him Saul. And today I want to tell you his story. And tell you the story of not just how his name was changed, but how his life was changed. I want to tell you his story using his own words:

Acts 22:3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia." Now when you first hear that Saul is from Tarsus, that may not mean a lot to you right away, but there's actually something incredibly important about this city. To help us understand it, I want us to go on a journey. Let's pull up a picture of where we are at today, at our Franklin Road location, and we are going to ask **Google Maps to take us to Tarsus**. This is Saul's hometown. And what is so important about this place is what it was known for. Now, in the ancient Greek world, everyone knows where all the best philosophers spent their time: in Athens, the same city where Socrates and Aristotle and Plato lectured centuries before. But though all the best Greek thinkers in the world wanted to make it in Athens, where do you suppose they went to train? To learn philosophy, to learn logic, to learn rhetoric? The answer: Tarsus. Saul's hometown was actually called the Athens of the East which

means that Saul grew up in the epicenter of Greek thought life. He was exposed to the very best philosophical training in the entire world. That was his childhood.

As Saul grew older, he moved away from Tarsus to the city of Jerusalem. **Let's take the journey there on Google maps.** If Tarsus was the center for Greek thought life, Jerusalem was the center for Hebrew thought life. And Saul didn't just spend time in Jerusalem; he was able to train under one of the greatest Rabbis in all of Jewish history. He says, **I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. Acts 22:3** When you study Jewish history, what you discover is that **this man (insert picture)**; is one of only seven Rabbis in Israel's 4,000-year history to be given the honorary title of Rabbon. And Saul studied under him.

So Saul not only had the opportunity to become a world class expert in Greek philosophy, he also had the opportunity to become a world class expert in theology. Here is what I want you to realize: in the first century there may not have been any other person on the planet who had the unique training and blend of interdisciplinary studies as Saul. But he wasn't one of those dispassionate intellectual types who lived in an ivory tower and pontificated endlessly about one theory after another. Saul was one of the most intense, passionate men anyone had ever met. He was so intense, so passionate, that he was willing to go to any length, pay any price, to teach others and bring them to the same conclusions he had arrived at. And that included arresting people who didn't believe what he believed...even overseeing the execution of people who didn't believe what he believed.

Saul was a Jew, and in his mind, any fellow Jew who didn't do what the Bible said and worship God the right way God taught them to worship, God needed to either change their convictions, or have their convictions changed for them. And in his mind, no one needed to make a greater change than all these people who began worshipping this man named Jesus. Saul and Jesus were contemporaries, probably born about the exact same year. This man Jesus lived among them until he was about 30 years old. He had just recently had been killed on a cross. And then all these people began saying that this man, who died on a cross, had risen from the dead. About 500 said they saw him, and they not only said they saw him raised from the dead, they began worshipping him as God and trying to convince the entire world to join them. So what did Saul do? In his own words: Acts 22:4 **I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison.** Saul is actually the person responsible for the very first Christian martyrdom of a man named Stephen, as recorded in Acts 7. This man was as committed to his cause as anyone who has ever lived. He was taking people's lives who said they believed in Jesus.

I want to pause right there and recognize that we still live in a world where people are taking the lives of those who worship Jesus. Just 14 days ago on Easter Sunday, we woke to the news that there were six different bombings in **Sri Lanka**. We have mission partners who have been preaching in Sri Lanka the last several months. They've seen hundreds of people come to faith in Jesus. One of our missionaries with whom I went to school with actually preached in one of the churches that was bombed. **As you can see, the devastation is beyond words.** This church alone saw 55 people lose their life, dozens more were seriously injured.

I was able to speak to our mission partners last week and asked them if there was anything we could do. They have set up funds to help families who lost loved ones, funds to cover medical costs for those who have lost limbs and need surgery, and funds to help rebuild their church. It was my incredible privilege to tell him that as a church, we are going to write a \$35,000 check to help toward those needs. When you give to support the ministry of this church, those are all the sorts of things we get to do as a church family. Help people who are in the greatest need. And we are so, so thankful. And if there is anything extra you want to give towards that, just put it in the offering plate this week or next. We will make sure that it gets to these Christians in Sri Lanka.

Let's get back into the story. It was actually while Saul is on route to arrest and likely kill more Christians that everything changed for him. Let's pick back up with **Google earth**. Paul was in Jerusalem, and he got official permission from the Jewish leaders to go to a town called Damascus to round up more Christians. Now, it was while Saul was on this trip, with several companions, that everything changed for him. Listen to the account in his own words:

6 “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. 7 I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’ 8 ‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked. ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’” he replied. 9 My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. 10 “‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked. 11 My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me. 12 A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. 13 He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him. 14 Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. 15 You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.’ Acts 22:6-16

In this moment, God's love changed everything for Saul. His passion didn't change, but his purpose did. He went from being zealous about eliminating the message of Jesus to zealously spreading the message of Jesus as much as anyone who has ever lived! And it's on his first mission trip that he took to tell people about Jesus that Saul changed his name to Paul. He's a new man with a new identity and a new purpose, and he needed a new name.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17 **If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. NKJV** Paul is saying God's love has the power to change your identity, to wash away the old, and make you new. And Paul says one of the reasons God chose to use him was to prove to everyone that if he can be saved, so can they! Listen to what Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15-16 **15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.** Paul is saying, “My life was a movie reel of one bad decision after another after another; now my life is a canvas of God's grace.”

Our theme for this entire series is God's love changes everything. God's love doesn't just save everything in a general sense; **God's love changes people**. Say that with me. God's love changes people. God's love changed everything for Paul. And God's love can change everything about you, too.

Just like Paul, you have a unique story...your family of origin, your education, your experiences, your passions. You might have thought it was just random. What if it wasn't. What if, just like Paul, it was all a part of God's plan for your life? And just like Paul, we are on our own path, traveling our own road, doing our own thing. What happens when God shows up and meets us on that road? What happens when God reveals his glory in the person of Jesus Christ? In that moment, when we place our faith in Jesus, everything about our lives can change!

You may think I'm making too much of this. How much can believing in Jesus really change about my life??? I'm telling you, when Jesus comes in, eventually everything changes! You may have heard about the case study done in **Yellowstone National Park**. Because of over hunting there had been no wolves in that park since 1925, but in 1995, after 70 years, they were reintroduced. One pack, just 14 of them. In short order they drove the deer from the valley. Less deer in the valley allowed vegetation to grow up. Once barren areas began forests of aspen, willows, and cottonwoods. The new trees became home to birds of every kind, ravens, hawks, even bald eagles. The trees also allowed beavers the necessary resources to make dams, and the beavers became ecosystem engineers in their own rights. Those dams caused an increase of fish population, otters, weasels, ducks, and various amphibians. All of the pools led to stabilized banks, reduced erosion, and the flow of rivers permanently changed. This is what biologists call a trophic cascade. All of Yellowstone National Park has been transformed and given new life and beauty, all because 24 years ago, they released one pack of wolves.

If 14 wolves can change the landscape of a park, can you imagine what Jesus can do in the landscape of your life. You might think trusting him is just one small change. No! When you trust him, he changes everything.

Another man who discovered this was named **Augustine**. He lived in the 4th Century AD. You see a statue of him here. Outside of people who wrote the Bible, he is well regarded as the most influential Christian theologian in history. But his life didn't start out that way. He was one of the leading philosophers in the world at that time. He was personally responsible for instructing the Emperor's son. And he lived an incredibly promiscuous life. He used his status and intellect to live in revelry. He loved to party, and he loved wine and women. He had a mistress for years.

One day, he was in a park, distraught and sullen by the place he was at in life, And he says: **"In the bitter agony of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice chanting from the nearby house saying and repeating over and over again, "Pick up and read. Pick up and read." I checked the flood of tears and stood up. I interpreted solely as a divine command to me to open the (Bible) and read the first chapter I might find. So I hurried back to the place where my friend Alpius was staying. I opened it up and in silence read the first passage, which said, "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh and its lust."**

Who wrote those words?? The apostle Paul! Augustine continues: **I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded my heart.**

He converted, and it changed everything! He went on to write about his conversion. This is the poem he composed:

**Late have I loved you,
Beauty so ancient and so new,
late have I loved you!
Lo, you were within,
but I outside, seeking there for you,
and upon the shapely things you have made
I rushed headlong,
I, misshapen.
You were with me but I was not with you.
They held me back far from you,
those things which would have no being
were they not in you.
You called, shouted, broke through my deafness;
you flared, blazed, banished my blindness;
you lavished your fragrance,
I gasped, and now I pant for you;
I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst;
you touched me, and I burned for your peace.**

Augustine doesn't go from being a man of passion and pleasure to being a stoic prude. He went from being a man on a fruitless and frustrating search for satisfaction with the fleeting whims of the world, to being a man whose passions and pleasures were satisfied in God. He went on to say these words: **You have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.**

God's love changed Paul. It changed Augustine, and it's still changing people today. Even the least likely people. One of our elders works for a missions organization that trains church leaders around the world. Just a few weeks ago he told me a story of a young woman in a Muslim majority country whose parents were concerned that one of her roommates might be a Christian. The young girl's uncle said he would look into it. In that family, he is the one responsible for protecting their Islamic faith. The uncle went to this young girl's house, saw a Bible on the kitchen table, and asked his niece which one of her roommates was a Christian. She said none of them. He pressed, "I don't think you realize how serious this is. Tell me! Which one is a Christian?" She said, "Uncle, I'm the Christian." Her uncle was distraught and said, "You know what I have to do, don't you?" If you know much about the orthodox Muslim faith, they require an honor killing of anyone in your family who renounces Islam. The girl said she understood, but that she had only one request before you kill me. He said, "I love you, you, you are my family, I'll do anything." She handed him that Bible and asked him to read it. He said he would. Three months later, the uncle met her again, who knew what to expect? He looked at her and said, I want to become a Christian, too. This uncle and his niece just graduated seminary together. By

the way, this church gives that seminary \$45,000 dollars to help train up men and women to become missionaries in their home countries. They are going to evangelize their country for Christ.

God's love changes everything. God's love changes people. God's love can change you. Wherever you might be at today, whatever road you might be on, God wants to reveal his heart to you. He wants to reveal Jesus to you. He wants his love to change your life.