

## Rooted & Grounded in Love ~ Ephesians

### Week 1 ~ Introduction & 1:1-14



### Introduction

The ancient city of Ephesus was in modern day Turkey. It was the most important city in western Asia Minor, as it was a major commercial, cultural, and religious center due to being at the intersection of major trade routes. As such, it was a strategic location for the spread of the Gospel.

The apostle Paul was the author of the letter we know as “Ephesians”. I put that in quotation marks because the earliest manuscripts don’t designate a place or recipient. But early on it was connected to Ephesus. In all likelihood Paul meant this letter to be circulated to the churches in Asia Minor, of which the Ephesian church was the most prominent, thus it has been historically linked to Ephesus. Paul wrote this letter from prison, likely in Rome, around AD 60-62.

In the book of Acts, which we went through two years ago during our theme of *Reimagine*, we read about Paul’s connection to Ephesus. Acts chapter 19 describes Paul’s roughly two and a half year ministry in Ephesus. The effectiveness/fruitfulness of his ministry is described this way, “...all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” (Acts 19:10) Apparently Ephesus served as a hub from which disciples went out preaching the Gospel and likely planting other churches throughout Asia Minor. It was likely these churches, along with the church in Ephesus, that were the intended recipients of this letter.

So what is the letter to the Ephesians all about? Please allow me to share from commentator Klyne Snodgrass, “*All the privileges of life are found in union with Christ and conveyed by the Spirit. Ephesians presents a gospel of union with Christ more powerfully than any other New Testament letter. Nothing short of attachment to Him will rescue us from the human plight, and nothing can define us as human beings more than attachment to Him. From living with Him we learn how to live for Him...Ephesians, then, has as its main purpose identity formation. It seeks to shape believers by reminding them how wonderful God’s work in Christ is, how significant their unity with Christ is, and what living for Christ looks like. It is a letter of definition and encouragement. Paul sought to ground, shape, and challenge his readers so that they might live their faith.*”

Before we begin our examination of Ephesians, let’s get a little technical. I realize that getting all grammatical, theological, and hermeneutical right off the bat may be a bit of a turn off, but it is important in understanding how the apostle Paul typically writes. Here’s a simple little axiom to help you remember: “*The indicative precedes the imperative*”.

Indicative and imperative are verb moods (see, I told you we would be getting technical.) The indicative mood states a fact or makes a declaration or assertion. The imperative mood expresses a command or an exhortation. So what we see Paul often doing in this writings—and it is clearly seen in Ephesians—is something like this...

- This is what God has done in Christ (indicative)
- Therefore, we should do this as a response (imperative)

To say it another way, the indicative is the WHY behind the WHAT (or the application, if you will), which is the imperative.

Why is this important, you ask? Because the Bible is not just a book of arbitrary rules (imperatives). Rather, it's a record of what God has done in history to bring about salvation/redemption of the world. The indicative helps us understand the rationale behind how we are to live in response to, and in relationship with, God.

Yet one more way of saying this: the indicative forms the foundation of our theology, our orthodoxy; the imperative is the resulting orthopraxy. While they must go together, the indicative explains the imperative. The imperative flows from and depends on the indicative.

The indicative-imperative relationship is a staple rhythm of Paul's writings, and it's crystal clear in the letter to the Ephesians. Most of the first three chapters are indicative, while most of the last three chapters are imperative. This is important because if we only focus on the imperative (i.e. the commands, rules) it is easy to slide into legalism and religiosity. The indicative gives us the truth and foundation, the WHY, on which to build our response. Perhaps another helpful axiom to keep in mind: God initiates, we respond. So Paul helps his readers to understand what God has done, and how we can/should respond.

Of course, no overview of Ephesians would be complete without hearing from our friends at the Bible Project... 😊

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/ephesians/>

Incidentally, I've had the privilege of traveling to Turkey a number of times and have visited Ephesus three times. (The photos above are not mine...I just pulled them from the internet.) It is very cool to stand in the place where things in the Bible actually happened. (And it does make me a bit partial to the book of Ephesians.)

- *If you could visit a location mentioned in the Bible, where would you like to visit? (We'll assume heaven is a given...choose another place.)*

#### 1:1-14

As mentioned earlier, Paul wrote this letter from prison. This is noteworthy because after a customary greeting (1:1-2) Paul breaks into doxology. (A doxology is an expression of praise, often in the form of a song, poem, or prayer.) Even while stuck in prison Paul can't help but gush in praise of God. In verses 3-14 Paul lays out the longest sentence in the New Testament (by English standards, a run-on sentence...which many translators break up, but in reality, verses 3-14 in Greek is one long sentence.) Throughout this letter we want to keep an eye out for the phrase "*in Christ*" (or "in Him", "in whom", etc.). This is the key indicative of the entire letter...we are in Christ.

In verses 3-14 Paul outlines blessing after blessing that has been lavished upon us who are in Christ. Something to take note of is that though Paul states that we have been blessed with "*every spiritual blessing*" (1:3), he does not list EVERY spiritual blessing. In other words, while this is an impressive list of blessings, it is NOT exhaustive but rather representative. (To actually list EVERY spiritual blessing would be a very large book, indeed.)

Notice also that God has "*blessed us in the heavenly realms*" (1:3). Where are the "*heavenly realms*"? It is the unseen, immaterial world that is all around us. The physical world and the spiritual world are overlapping and interlocking. This is the Biblical worldview or cosmology. While this conception of

the world is important to understand, the point Paul is subtly driving at is a contrast between the blessings and promises of the Old Covenant and those of the New Covenant in Christ.

In the Old Covenant the promises were far more oriented around material, physical, and national prosperity for Israel. The blessings/promises in the New Covenant in Christ (the covenant we belong to) are more spiritual and global in nature. So, for example, whereas inhabiting the Promised Land of Canaan was a significant promise/blessing in the Old Covenant, that is not part of the New Covenant. Similarly, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers was not a part of the Old Covenant but is a significant part of the New Covenant.

Now let's look at the blessings Paul outlines for us...

God chose us, predestined us, made us holy and blameless, adopted us, redeemed us, forgave us, made known to us the mystery of His will, given us an inheritance, sealed us with His Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance. WOW! The proper response to these incredibly generous blessings is Praise...which is exactly what Paul expresses and encourages his readers to remember.

- *Of all the blessings listed, which means the most to you? Can you think of other blessings that Paul didn't mention?*

It is tempting to think that we are "blessed" when situations/circumstances are favorable. Something to take note of is that the blessings Paul mentions aren't so much situational or circumstantial, but rather our state of being...what naturally goes along with being in Christ. Situations and circumstances can change, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse, but the blessedness that comes with being in Christ simply is. Additionally, this state of being is not something that we could have acquired or accomplished or attained on our own, rather we receive them by grace...or "to the praise of His glorious grace" (1:6) as Paul likes to say.

- *The best, most important things in life are received not earned. What do you think, how do you feel about that? What effect does/can/should that have on our approach to life?*

Situationally/circumstantially Paul was in prison. Yet from that place Paul bursts forth this beautiful doxology that we're reading this week. Regardless of his situation or circumstance Paul knew who he was in Christ, and wants his readers to be confident of that as well.

- *Do you allow your situation/circumstances to rule your life...constantly reacting to however they change, or are you secure and anchored in who you are in Christ regardless of what comes your way? How do you allow who you are in Christ to guide/navigate your life? When have you found that challenging? What have you found that comforting.*

If you were to read this passage in the various translations/versions available, you'd likely catch different nuances, and maybe different ways of understanding various statements that Paul wrote. While it might be tempting to ask the question, "Which translation is the most right/accurate?" that could easily become an exercise in missing the point. Regardless of the various ways this sentence/passage can be worded, Paul wanted his readers to grasp that God the Father loves us and has richly and abundantly showered us with His grace and goodness. How is this possible? Through Jesus (much more of this will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.) And in case it sounds too good to be true, we have the Presence and work of the Holy Spirit in/with us to witness/testify to the truth of it all (this, too, will be elaborated upon...this is just the introduction after all.)

- *Read this passage in a few different translations/versions. What differences do you notice? What new insights do you gain? (Again, don't be overly concerned about which translation/version is "the best"...translators do the best they can...let's not miss the overall point.)*

- *If you could describe/articulate the point of this passage in one sentence, how would you say it?*
- *As you reflect on this passage, allowing the truth/reality of it to penetrate your heart...how do you want to respond?*
- *When you think of “praising God” what do you want to praise Him for? (Or, why do you want to praise Him?)*

As we get caught up in all the blessings that are lavished upon us—and as we make our way through a rather complicated sentence—it’s easy to miss Paul’s statement of what God is ultimately up to in verse 10...that is, to gather up (or sum up, or unite) all things in heaven and earth in (or under) Christ. This is actually a much more significant detail and priority than how we’ve been blessed. This has been God’s plan all along, and this is the future in which we are headed. This being the case, union with Christ is THE MOST IMPORTANT matter/issue. Whatever other matters that can occupy our minds, hearts, actions, time...our union with Jesus is the most vital. This is the “heart check” of this passage: do any of the spiritual blessings even matter if we don’t desire to be, and enjoy being, in union with Christ?

- *It is perhaps tempting to think of all these “spiritual blessings” abstractly and conceptually instead of practically and concretely. As you reflect on this passage, what practical difference do these “spiritual blessings” have in your/our life? (Don’t worry if you struggle with this a little...the whole rest of the letter helps flesh it out.)*
- *What difference does it make to know that God has made known to us what He’s up to (see verses 9-11)?*
- *What activities or descriptions in this passage relate to the Father, to Jesus, and to the Holy Spirit?*

A couple of key words at the end of this passage are important to take note of. Paul states that we are “*marked with a seal*” (1:13) i.e. with the Holy Spirit. A seal authenticates ownership. The idea that we belong to God is compounded by Paul saying in verse 14 that we are God’s “*possession*”, and by the use of the word “*redemption*”, i.e. being purchased by someone. This reinforces the idea that we are owned by someone. The obvious tone of this passage is that’s a good and glorious proposition.

- *It is very popular in western thought to think that we are our own person. But this doesn’t jibe with the story of Scripture. We are either slaves to sin (thus not our own), or we belong to God (again, not our own). What do you think, how do you feel, about the idea that you are not your own?*

(scroll down for Soul Training Exercise)



### Soul Training Exercise ~ Count Your Blessings

We've done this before...it's from the third chapter of James Bryan Smith's *The Good And Beautiful God*. Smith writes, "*Counting your blessings is a powerful spiritual exercise. Make a list of all the things God has blessed you with, all the things that make life wonderful. Pay attention to the details of your life. Look for hidden things. Take notice of all of those wonderful things you easily overlook.*"

Now please allow me to add my own little caveat. I think a good and fun way to do this little exercise is outside...either sitting or walking...while utilizing the blessing of our senses. Look around at all there is to see; listen to all there is to hear; smell whatever there is to smell; feel whatever there is to feel; taste...um, that's a tricky one...maybe take a snack with you.

By way of example, I enjoy taking a walk first thing in the morning—watching the morning sky go from darker to lighter; feeling the breeze on my face; listening as the morning goes from silence to birds chirping; noticing the fragrance in the air as spring flowers bloom, rain has freshly fallen, lawn recently mowed...you get the idea. We use our senses all the time...so much so it's easy to take them for granted. Maybe paying attention to the blessings our senses afford us can be a catalyst to counting other blessings as well.