

Ephesians 1:1-14

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[0:00] Let us pray as we stand. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the privilege of being in your presence and hearing you speak to us.! Heavenly Father, we thank you for the privilege of being in your presence and hearing you speak to us.

And so we pray that you would give us ears to hear, minds to know, and hearts to receive all that you have for us in the Lord Jesus. And we pray this in his name. Amen.

May you take a seat. Thank you. Welcome to St. John's. Lovely to be here with us.

If you're new, I just want to share kind of what our vision statement is with you. Our vision statement is to be a community of contrast. That means we want to be a community that is a little bit different than other communities that you experience in your life.

And the reason why it's different is because we want to be a community that is gripped by the grace of the Lord Jesus. Where his grace has captured our hearts and minds.

[1:04] His grace has transformed the way we relate to each other. And that makes us a community of contrast. But we don't want to just be transformed ourselves by this grace. We want to be a community that shares the love and the grace of the Lord Jesus with our friends and our neighbors and our coworkers in the city and beyond.

So a community of contrast, gripped by the gospel of grace, sharing Christ with our city. And because this is our vision, we are heading into the book of Ephesians, Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

So if you could open up to page 976, that would be great. This is a new sermon series for us. And we're going to do three months in this little letter of six chapters.

And it's written by the Apostle Paul from prison, most likely in Rome, around 60 to 62 A.D. And it's written to a group of Christians in and around the city of Ephesus, which was a place where Paul had spent three years of his life living there.

Three years ministering in Ephesus. So he knew these people, he knew these churches, and now he's writing to them from prison in Rome. But before we jump into the details of the letter, let me share a few reasons why I've chosen for us to be in the book of Ephesians and why now.

[2:19] So the first reason is it's my favorite letter. And someone once said that Ephesians is the crown of all of Paul's letters. Another person upped the ante and said Ephesians is the queen of all letters ever written.

And another person upped the ante even more and said Ephesians is the divinest words ever written by a human hand. It's a marvelous little book. It's like a stick of dynamite spiritually.

And one of the reasons why I love Ephesians so much is that it gives us the biggest possible picture of who God is and what God is doing in the world.

And it doesn't just give us the biggest possible picture. It then shows us our place in what God is doing in the world. So within the first 10 verses of the book, Paul tells us about what God was thinking about before he ever created the world.

And then by the time he gets to verse 10, he's telling us what God's plan is for the fulfillment of all his purposes in history for the whole entire world. So eternity past to eternity future, Paul is giving us the biggest possible vision of what God is on about in the world.

[3:33] And the wonderful thing about this is that what God is on about in the world speaks directly to some of the major questions in our current cultural moment. You know that questions around what does it mean to be human and what sort of society are we building are quite significant in our culture right now.

So anybody been to Oak Ridge Mall recently or Oak Ridge Park Development? That's great. Anybody? I hear the food court is good. Anybody experience that? Okay, there we go. Anybody buy

Rolexes?

No. Yeah, Ryan bought a Rolex there. That's good. He gets paid really well. So I think the tagline of that mall should probably be all the things we can't afford.

But one of the most interesting things about this mall is it opened in the grand launch was in May. And about a week beforehand, I got a little pamphlet on my doorstep inviting me to go to the grand opening.

Me in particular. And this, it was interesting. I opened the front page and the very first paragraph of the front page, it basically said, AI is doing this.

[4:41] AI is replacing this. AI is going to be like this. But what is it that you as a human, only you can be and do? And then it spent a whole page describing a vision of what it means to be uniquely human.

And then the rest of the book was saying, this is what we're building. This is the little society we're building in the middle of the city, the biggest development in North America.

And if you can participate in this society we're building, you will experience the fullness of what we've just told you it means to be human. It's fascinating. And what Ephesians does is it actually says that God is about the project of building a new humanity as well.

He's building a new society in the midst of the world as well. But he's building one that is, has a very different foundation. So as we go through this book, we're going to learn more and more what it means to be a community of contrast, just four or five blocks away from the mall.

And as we are in the book of Ephesians, it's going to inject spiritual vitality into our veins. Because Ephesians doesn't just say, this is true, memorize it, download it in your minds, make sure you know the right answers.

[5:57] Ephesians sings the truth over us. So that the melody of what God has done captures our imaginations and hearts and wraps us up in praising God for his goodness and glory.

Ephesians doesn't just say, here's all the ways in which God has been gracious to you. Make sure you know it and understand it. Ephesians says, God's grace is going to radically transform every area of your life.

And let me show you all the areas in which his grace is going to transform. And so Ephesians draws us into the drama of what God is doing to redeem his world.

And the way that it does that in the first half of chapter one, right out of the gate, is it sings a song of praise over us. Paul sings a song of praise.

And in verses three to 14 in the Greek, it's one long run-on sentence that's 202 words. I was thinking about having us all try to say it in one breath.

[6:51] But I figure that's not possible. And the main point is this. Praise be to God. Bless God for his great plan of redemption.

Bless God for all the ways that he has blessed us. Did you notice the circle blessing? Bless God for all the ways he's blessed us. And Paul, it's almost like drinking, trying to drink from a waterfall.

It's like trying to drink from Niagara Falls. There is so much here, so many blessings of God that he talks about. It's really hard to actually pick them out and meditate on them.

I want to pick out a few for you. But the key throughout the passage is this little phrase, in Christ. It's repeated about 10 or 11 times. I was watching Kung Fu Panda with my kids yesterday.

And Kung Fu Panda had a great line. He was training other people to do Kung Fu. And he said, I want you to listen very carefully. I'm only going to repeat this 10 times. And if you've ever had kids or you've tried to babysit kids, you know how appropriate that is.

[8:00] And that's pretty much what Paul is saying. Listen very carefully. I'm only going to repeat this 10 or 11 times. Every blessing that comes to you, that God wants to give to you, comes to you through the person of Jesus Christ.

It's almost like, think of a boomerang. It's like all the blessings of God emerge out of the person of Jesus Christ. And then they lead us back to the person of Jesus Christ.

Or think of an hourglass. I don't know if we use those anymore. We do use some of those in my household. But you have this big part up top that has all the sand. And it's like this vast realm of blessing.

And yet it can only trickle down to the bottom through a very, very small opening. And that's kind of what's happening here. As Paul's describing the vast blessings of God. But they only come to us through this very slender opening.

Which is the person of Jesus Christ. And there are three particular reasons why Paul wants us to know that God is worthy of our praise. In this opening song of praise.

[9:01] Three reasons. In verses 4 to 6, because God chose us. In verses 7 to 10, because God has forgiven us. And in verses 11 to 14, because God has sealed us.

He's chosen us, he's forgiven us, and he's sealed us. Let's begin with the choice. If you would join me in verse 3. Chapter 1.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ. With every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Verse 4.

Even as or because he chose us in him before the foundation of the world. Why? That we should be holy and blameless before him.

Paul repeats the same thing, basically, with different words. In love, he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace.

[10:04] So, Paul here is talking about what Christians have often called the doctrine of election. Those two words, God chose you before the foundation of the world, and God predestined you to be his children.

It's basically saying God chose you before you ever chose God. It's saying God was committed to you before there was ever a you to be committed to.

Before you were ever created. It's saying God had a purpose for you before you even existed. And now some of you may say, hey, wait, hold on a minute.

Does that mean I'm just a robot that's living out like a pre-programmed script for my life? Did I have any genuine choice in believing in who Jesus is and in this Christian life?

And what about my friends and my family that don't believe? What does this say about them? And is God's choice fixed? Is it just something arbitrarily determined from eternity past and that's it?

[11:12] And so, when we read things like this, it often brings up a lot of questions in us that make us kind of doubt, who is God really and can I really trust him? And is my salvation really secure?

And it can raise a lot of questions for us. But instead of answering all those questions, I just want to bring you back into the context in which Paul was speaking these words in 60 AD in Ephesus.

Because remember, in Ephesus, in the ancient world, there were gods everywhere. You had the god of farming. You had the god of health. You had the god of having children.

You had the god of, like, you name it, of economic prosperity. You had gods everywhere. And if you wanted to flourish in life, if you wanted to have a good life, you had to make sure that the gods were appeased and the gods liked you.

So you needed to offer prayers. You needed to offer sacrifices. You needed to do the right things. And so, you had the sense that your life and your future and your fate was always in the hands of these gods.

[12:16] And these gods could change their mind about you at any moment. They could change their mind about you at any moment. And there was also this sense that there were evil spiritual forces at work in the world.

And the way that you control those forces is you use magic, either to protect yourself against them or to use these forces for your own benefit. So Paul is speaking into that sort of context.

And he's basically saying God is nothing like the gods that you have all around you. He doesn't just randomly change his mind about you. He's not someone that you have to constantly be appeasing. Because God is someone who has loved you from before the foundation of the world. That means he has been, his purposes for you are stable. They are steadfast.

They are rock solid. They're not going to change. He's not going to change his mind about you. So you do not need to fear. In other words, this whole teaching about God setting his love on us and God choosing us is intended to bring us great comfort and security.

[13:25] And to know that if we believe in Christ, then our salvation is absolutely secure. And Paul says, this is the first reason why I want you to worship God.

It's because God is not somebody to be feared. He is somebody who has loved you forever before you even began to love him. It's a tremendous thing.

So this doctrine of election actually isn't meant to be so scary. It's something that's supposed to cause us to worship God and give thanks to him. Now, the second reason why Paul wants us to worship God is because he's forgiven us.

And if you look at verse 7 with me, it says, In Jesus we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished on us. Trespasses are all the ways that we cross God's good and healthy boundaries that he gives us. So in the Bible, there's always this sense that God wants to bless us, bless us, bless us, bless us, bless us, bless us.

[14 : 29] But that God's blessing is always meant to be experienced within particular boundaries. And when we step outside of those boundaries and pursue blessing outside of them, things tend to go awry for us.

So let me give a silly example. My brother, I think I was about 19, my brother went on a missions trip in high school to Thailand for six weeks. And he got really used to eating a lot of spicy food. So when he came home, we decided to go to a Thai restaurant. And this is my younger brother. So he was telling me about how he has a great tolerance for spicy food now. So he wants to go to Thai food and get spicy food.

And being the older brother, I thought, I've got to match him. And so when the waiter came up, the waitress came up, I asked for Thai soup, which was really great.

And she said, how spicy, one out of 10. And I said, I want 10. And she looked at me, you know, given what I look like, and said, that's probably not wise.

[15 : 28] And you don't know your limits. And I said, give me 10. And it took me an hour to eat that soup.

I did eat every bit of it because I was stubborn. But it stuck with me and caused harm for about 24 hours. It's a silly example, but it just makes the point that we aren't actually, we're designed with particular limits.

And spicy Thai food is a great gift if I stay within one to four. But if I go beyond those limits, which I know are good and right for me, something that's meant to be a good blessing from God actually becomes something that is harmful to me.

And what Paul is saying is he's saying there's a whole bunch of ways in which we step over the boundaries that we know are good for us and that God has given us and are healthy for us in our lives.

Whether it's in a relationship. Whether it's clicking that button on the internet that we know we shouldn't have clicked. Whether it's telling that lie that we know we shouldn't have told.

[16 : 33] Whether it's saying those words which we've been thinking and we knew we shouldn't say, but they just came out. And all the different ways we can cross boundaries and they can wreak havoc on our relationship with God and our relationship with others and our sense of who we are before the Lord.

And what Paul is saying is that through what God has done, what Christ has done in shedding his blood on the cross for us, he has made a way for us to be forgiven and to be redeemed and restored when we cross boundaries.

It's an astonishing thing. And Paul says this is a reason for great praise. But Paul doesn't just finish there. Paul goes on, if you look at verses 9 and 10 with me, and he says, When you experience forgiveness and redemption and restoration in your life, your life actually becomes a movie preview of what God is going to do with the whole entire universe someday.

So look at verse 9 and 10 with me. Paul says that in all wisdom and insight, God is making known to us the mystery of his eternal will. According to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time.

In other words, Paul said, here's God's great plan for all of history. Verse 10, to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

[18 : 05] That word unite means to give something a new head, a new king, a new ruler, a new sovereign. In other words, Paul is saying God's purpose in the history of the world is to take every aspect of the universe and bring it under the gracious lordship of Jesus Christ.

I think one helpful way to think about this is to think about a symphony and a conductor. We have somebody on staff at St. John's that has a PhD in choral conducting.

Did you guys even know that was possible? And what Paul is basically saying is Jesus has two PhDs in choral conducting. He has one for heaven and he has one for earth.

And what he's seeking to do is by his gracious rule and reign, he is seeking to take every aspect of creation. It's gifting, it's particular instrument, it's particular tone, it's particular ability.

And he's trying to synchronize them under his lordship so that together they create a beautiful hymn of praise to God. To the praise of his glory. And Paul is saying that if you cross a boundary and you experience God's forgiveness and redemption and restoration in your life, then that your life is going to become a little window and portal and picture of what God is intending to do with the whole entire universe eventually.

[19 : 35] And so it becomes a really beautiful thing. And Paul says this too is a wonderful reason for praise. Are you with me so far? Okay, let's go for the last one.

The first is God chose us to belong to him forever. That's the first reason for praise. The second is God made a way for us to be forgiven and restored. And that's a part of his great purpose for the universe.

That's the second reason for praise. And the third reason for praise is God seals us with his Holy Spirit. So if you look at verse 13 with me.

Verse 13. In Christ, you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it to the praise of his glory.

I love this. Somebody gave me a letter last Sunday that was secured on the back of the letter with a wax and a wax seal and impress.

[20 : 39] I didn't know we still did that. But it was great. They put wax on the letter and then they pressed in this beautiful pattern. And there was this lovely seal that reflected the image of the one who was sealing.

The pattern of the one who was sealing. And that's kind of a similar image here. Is that Paul says, God doesn't just say, I've done all these wonderful things for you in Jesus Christ.

I'm going to leave you alone. Paul says, God impresses the Holy Spirit into our lives. So that the likeness and the image and the righteousness and holiness of God is impressed into our lives until that day when we receive our inheritance in God's presence and we are made to be fully like him. So, friends, I just want to say, don't take for granted the gift of the Holy Spirit in your life. In Ephesians, this is a major theme.

Like, God has given you the third person of the Holy Trinity to dwell in you. He's there to give you access to the Father when you don't know what to cry out.

[21 : 47] He's there to strengthen you inwardly when you feel totally weak. He's there to help you understand how much Christ loves you when you don't feel like you're possibly ever worthy of his love.

He's there to help you reconcile with other people and enter into peaceful relationships where there's resentment and cynicism and breakdown. He's there to fill you with the presence of God and make sure that the word of God stays alive in your heart and doesn't fall flat.

And he's there to help you learn how to pray. And he's there to help you grieve when you sin. And he's there to help you know that you are loved by God. So the gift of the Holy Spirit is not something we should take for granted, but it's also not something we ought to complicate too much.

This is the thing. Sometimes we can think that the way we'll know that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives is if really cool stuff's happening all over the place. Like, we're seeing miracles.

We've got crazy gifts. Like, there's really exciting things happening all over the place. And it's not that those are bad. But Paul says in verse 13, you want to know that, you want to know how you know the Holy Spirit's at work in your life?

[23 : 00] Because when you heard, when somebody told you about Jesus, it captivated you. You thought, I've never heard of anybody like this before. And you had this inner sense that you have to follow this person, Jesus.

That he has the key to your life. He is the purpose of your life. He is the savior of your life. He is the Lord of your life. And there's something about this Jesus that captured you and made you want to submit to him and love him and follow him with everything that you have.

And Paul says, if you have that response to hearing about Jesus, that means the Holy Spirit is at work in you. And so, brothers and sisters, this is part of the wonder of what Paul talks about here. It's like drinking from Niagara Falls. We have so many reasons to praise God. Because he chose us. Because he has forgiven us. And because he has sealed us with his Holy Spirit.

And as we close, I just want to ask you, which of these blessings of God did you need to be reminded of today? Which of these blessings of God did you need to be reminded of today?

[24 : 07] And which of these blessings of God do you need to cling to this week? Because brothers and sisters, God has so much to give you in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And as we go through Ephesians, you're just going to realize there's more than you could ever drink in. In any one moment. And that's the beauty of it.

Is that if we're united with Christ, then we get the rest of our lives to discover just how much grace there is for us. So may the Lord bless you, friends, as you cling to him and praise him this week. Amen. Amen.