

LESSON ONE

Get in Line with God's Plan

FOCAL TEXT

Ephesians 1:1–14

BACKGROUND

Ephesians 1

MAIN IDEA

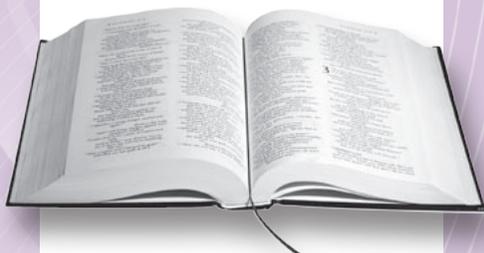
God calls us to participate in the lavish plan he has set forth in Christ for enjoying all the blessings of being in good standing in God's family.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What has God done for us in Christ, and why does it matter?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to describe God's plan for human life and respond to God's offer



UNIT ONE

The Letter to the Ephesians

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

In the ancient world, the city of Ephesus was one of the most important cities in the Roman province of Asia. The area of this province today is the western portion of Turkey. In New Testament times, Ephesus functioned as a major port city, although eventually the port silted up. The ancient site is now completely land bound. A thriving ancient metropolis, Ephesus housed one of the *seven wonders of the world* at that time, the temple to the Greek goddess Artemis. As such, Ephesus functioned as the center of major pagan rituals. Because of this temple, the port, and the city's geographic location, its economy thrived during ancient times.

Ephesus also became one of the centers of early Christianity. Acts 19—20 records Paul's work in Ephesus, and Christian tradition indicates that the Apostle John as well as Mary also resided there. A strong tradition also exists that Mary may have died there and that Timothy served as pastor and was martyred in Ephesus. Ephesus is the first of the seven churches addressed in Revelation 2—3. There are numerous indications in the New Testament and in early church history that the church at Ephesus was one of the most significant early Christian churches. Later, Ephesus served as the site of one of the main ecumenical councils of the church in A.D. 431.

There is considerable debate among scholars about Paul's authorship of the Ephesian letter, but most conservative scholars credit it to him. The debate revolves in part around the impersonal nature of the epistle as compared to Paul's other letters. One possible reason advanced is that the epistle was a circular letter that was carried from one congregation to the next. It is possible that it went first to Ephesus but then because of its importance was circulated to other churches in Asia Minor. Any reader can tell that there is a great deal of similarity with the Epistle to the Colossians. This could have occurred because they were written at approximately the same time to deal with similar questions those churches faced. The instance of a circular letter would account for the fact that Paul did not address individuals in the same way that he often did in his other correspondence. Traditionally, these two letters, along

with the Epistle to Philemon and the Epistle to the Philippians, have been called the “Prison Letters of Paul,” written during his early imprisonment in Rome about A.D. 60–62.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Introduction

1:1, 2. Paul identified himself with a salutation and greeting that indicates that God chose him as an apostle. Frequently, we find that Paul did this so that his readers saw that there was no difference between him and the other apostles. *Apostle* was the title he most often gave himself. Some have suggested that the apostolic gift was that of planting churches. Paul’s apostleship was by God’s authority.

The recipients for Paul’s letter were believers. While most translations today designate these saints “in Ephesus,” the oldest manuscripts that are available leave these two words out, giving support to the idea that Ephesians was a circular letter for other congregations as well. Whoever the immediate recipients of the letter were, it is certain that they were believers, for Paul stated that they were “faithful.” His salutation concluded with his use of the words “grace” and “peace.” In New Testament times a standard Hebrew greeting was that of “peace,” while “grace” may have been a Christian adaptation of a common Greek greeting. The two together form an introductory blessing for Paul’s audience.

God’s Chosen People (1:3–6)

1:3. Paul continued his blessing by using forms of the word “blessing” three times in this sentence. The word he used in the original language is the root word of our word *eulogy*. He stated that the source of this blessing is God. He added that the blessings that God gives are “spiritual” not material. The use of the word “every” suggests that God is the source of all the spiritual blessings that the saints experience. The word “heavenly” designates the sphere or realm. It probably means not only heaven but also the sphere of the church. Paul expressed his passion for God in this verse. The tone of the verse suggests its use by both Paul and the early church in worship.

1:4–5. These two verses have become one of the most controversial passages in all of Paul’s writing. Calvinists tend to regard the statement “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” as verification of predestination. However, it is important to note that the context of this verse and the following verse is in the terms of a collective sense. While the church is certainly made up of individuals, Paul’s use of the word for “chose” is most often used to refer to a group. Hence, Paul referred to the church even though he did not use the word for church here. The idea Paul conveyed is that God chose the church as a collection of believers from the very beginning to fulfill God’s purposes.

Paul told the Ephesians that God’s purposes originated before the creation of the world itself. God chose the church to be “holy and blameless,” to serve as a pure instrument to accomplish God’s divine mission.

This mission was and is to be accomplished in love. It was in God’s love that God “predestined” the church. The best translation of “predestined” here refers to *being in God’s mind*. Paul was not referring to the idea of specific individuals here. Rather he referred to God predestining *the church* to fulfill what originally functioned as the purpose of Israel. This passage should not be considered without the context of Old Testament Israel. The meaning here suggests that just as God ordained Israel to carry out God’s purposes in ancient times, before the beginning of time God chose the church to accomplish the divine mission. Paul wrote that election had no longer a national limitation. The election or predestination of the church serves to complete the choices of God.

The issue of personal predestination is not one that Paul or the New Testament really sought to answer. It remains an infinite question that can be understood and answered only by an infinite God. The purpose of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians revolves around the Christological foundation of the church and the responsibility of the church community to itself. Paul wrote that from the beginning God planned for a community that would worship and serve him. This was God’s will from the beginning. These verses also reaffirm the pre-existence of Christ in creation, much in the same way that John 1 does. The sense of these two verses is that out of the divinity of Christ flows the life-giving water the church offers.¹

1:6. “To the praise of the glory of His grace” is similar to the statement at the end of verse 14. This once again suggests a liturgical purpose of

this passage as in 1:3. It also demonstrates that Paul's writing was a form of worship for him. He celebrated God's grace even as he wrote. Paul experienced grace so strongly that he elaborated on it in the statement that follows. The word "bestowed" is a form of the noun for *grace*. One could almost translate this as *his grace, which he freely graced on us*. Paul could not say enough about this grace.

Paul used the term "the Beloved" to refer to Jesus. Some commentators have suggested that this may have been a Messianic title used by Jews in the first century.

God's Redemptive Plan (1:7–12)

1:7–8. Paul briefly explained God's redemptive plan in these verses and those that follow. This passage must also be considered against the backdrop of Old Testament Israel. The ancient Hebrews were a redeemed people. God redeemed them from bondage in Egypt and from exile in Babylon. The Passover symbolized Israel's redemption from Egypt, but Paul identified "Him and His blood"—meaning Jesus, the Beloved in verse 6—as the source of God's redemption. As commentator Francis Foulkes writes, "Christ fulfilled the need expressed throughout the Old Testament sacrificial system. His death means that *blood* has been shed as a sacrifice for sin; it may also be described in term of sin's defeat and so the release of men and women from its bondage."² This sacrifice made possible the "forgiveness" of sins and was a result of "the riches of His grace." Once again Paul drew his readers' attention to God's abundant grace that far surpasses anything that our limited minds could understand. Paul used another superlative to describe God's grace. "Lavished" can be translated *showered*; the word pictures an overflowing fountain from an endless source.³

1:9–10. Paul verified for his readers that they—and we—were being given divine insight into God's purposes and will. This is the "mystery" of which Paul spoke. Some have argued that Paul by "mystery" was speaking of some mysterious initiatory rite or was making reference to some apocalyptic message prepared in heaven. What Paul referred to here was what he has already stated. The event that Paul regarded a "mystery" was how God brings men and women back into fellowship with God. Paul could not explain fully this mystery because it is wrapped in divine love

and grace. It only came to pass in the “fullness of the times,” a statement similar to one in Galatians 4:4. Paul insisted that all creation and all grace revolve around Jesus Christ. The sense of what Paul wrote here is that ultimately all things will be fully explained in Christ, including this divine mystery of God’s redemptive work, which is so unfathomable that human beings cannot fully understand it. This latter verse also carries the sense that just as God created all things and all things were disrupted by sin, God’s ultimate purpose is to restore all things—God’s relationship with humankind and even all things in heaven and earth—in unity.

1:11–12. Paul added that God gives believers “an inheritance.” Christians have been claimed as God’s own. As commentator Andrew Lincoln writes, “Believers are now explicitly related to the cosmic Christ in whom all things are summed up.”²⁴ Once again, Paul repeated a derivative of the phrase “to the praise of His glory,” thus reinforcing the thought that the events and meaning of this entire passage are related to worship.

God’s Sealing Spirit (1:13–14)

In verse 13, Paul affirmed the experience of the Ephesian Christians. They had listened to this truth of God’s hope through the gospel, and they had believed.

Furthermore, Paul identified the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believers’ lives as the *seal* of God. The imagery is that of a personal sign of something important, such as a seal placed on an important letter. Another type of seal might be a brand placed on an animal. For Jews, circumcision was God’s seal. Paul wrote that for Christians the Holy Spirit was God’s seal. The promise of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled at Pentecost and in the lives of all believers since Pentecost. The Spirit also is God’s down payment on the good things to come for believers. Verse 14 carries this thought forward. Paul wrote that the Holy Spirit is “a pledge” for the believers’ inheritance. The word translated “pledge” can also be translated as *guarantee*. The thought is that the presence of the Holy Spirit is the first installment on the promise of salvation. The completed payment would be the resurrection of the spiritual body and eternity with God. Believers then become God’s “possession.”

Paul closed the ending of this section with a final outburst of praise, “to the praise of His glory.” Paul followed this statement with a prayer

for his readers about God's plan for them (1:15–19) and with a passage in verses 20–23 that is similar to that which he wrote to the Colossians in chapter 1 of that epistle.

Focusing on the Meaning

God's original plan for humankind was for human beings to live in relationship with him forever. People ruin that relationship with the choice to sin. God understood that this choice would come. So God also planned before creation to redeem human beings from that choice. God's universal plan is to offer forgiveness of sin through the sacrifice of his eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Human beings embrace that plan and God restores that relationship when they choose Jesus Christ to control their lives. The church is God's agency for conveying that good news.

This passage affirms the good news that God's grace reaches out to us. God has a plan to redeem those separated from him. When we are forgiven and redeemed, we are given a divine inheritance. The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is God's down payment on that which we will enjoy forever. The Spirit also is God's guarantee to us that we are and will be God's children forever.

We as the church are also a part of the bigger purpose of God. Once we are a part of God's family, we have a responsibility. While we enjoy the blessings of adoption and of God's inheritance, we also carry the responsibility of letting others know of the promise of relationship with God that can be theirs. Our inheritance is meant to be shared. God's family is not an exclusive club. It is open to everyone.

When Anne Graham Lotz appeared on a well-known television news program, the person conducting the interview asked her, "Are you one of those who believe that Jesus is exclusively the only way to heaven? You know how mad that makes people these days!" Immediately Lotz responded, "Jesus is not exclusive. He died so that *anyone* could come to Him for salvation."⁵ God's love is not exclusive. God's wants all people to be in right relationship with him. Our purpose as the church is to draw people to God so that they can become part of the family.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Remind the class that in the early days of television game shows, there was *Match Game*, where contestants and celebrities filled in blanks in statements. Challenge members to suggest what could go in the blank for this phrase: lavish _____. (Ideas might include *gift, spending, or party*.)
2. Read the Main Idea for the lesson. Ask, *Do people think of God’s plans as being lavish? Why or why not?*

Guide Bible Study

3. Invite a member to read aloud Ephesians 1:1–3. Note that Ephesians is one of Paul’s prison letters. Ask, *What was Paul’s attitude here? What did he say about himself? about the “saints”? about God?*
4. Consider the phrase “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” Discuss Paul’s belief that there is an unseen sphere where God is at work blessing us. Ask how this view can affect how we see life here on earth.
5. Give the following illustration: A devoted Christian couple, the Smiths, adopted little Sarah. Due to this relationship, what can Sarah inherit? Brainstorm about not only material items, but also about intangibles such as family stories, the rights of a daughter, and an understanding of Christianity.
6. On the board, begin a list with the title “Spiritual Blessings for God’s Adopted Children.” List “grace” and “peace” (Eph. 1:2), to get the list started. Ask members what these two words mean to them.

7. Read verses 4–6 while the class listens for spiritual blessings that are named. Lead members to name spiritual blessings that they find in these verses; list them on the board.
8. Enlist someone to read aloud verses 7–12 as the class listens for spiritual blessings that are named. Then ask the class to add the spiritual blessings that are in these verses.
9. Now write “God, Our Perfect Father” on the board. Remind the class that earlier in the chapter Paul referred to God as Father (1:3). Lead the class to search for phrases in verses 7–12 that would remind us of the tasks of the perfect father—God. Ideas might include
 - He forgives us (1:7).
 - He is generous (1:7).
 - He is wise (1:8).
 - He explains himself to us (1:9).
 - He is kind (1:9).
 - He administers well (1:10).
 - He plans well and then works out the plans (1:11–12).
10. Ask, *When we make a pledge—to pay for a car or house, for example—what do we submit so that the other person can trust us to fulfill that pledge or promise?* Read verses 13–14.
11. As needed, use the commentary in the *Study Guide* to explain the significance of the seal of the Holy Spirit.

Encourage Application

12. Enlist three readers for the following:
 - Reader 1:** Jeremy had big plans—to finish college, build up a thriving business, give money to good causes, and retire in comfort.
 - Reader 2:** Louisa had big plans—to run for political office in her community, build up a grass roots following, and then run for governor.
 - Reader 3:** What comes to mind when you hear that a person had “big plans”? Have you ever had “big plans”?

That's fine! But compare those "big plans" with these: "Before the foundation of the world," God had big plans. His most magnificent plan was to redeem us, adopt us, forgive us, and secure us for eternity with him. Yes, God's plan was lavish, and his blessings are lavish.

(A copy of these readings can be downloaded from "Teaching Resource Items" for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org.)

13. Distribute the following questions, including space for written, private responses:

- (1) God is the source of spiritual blessings. Is there a spiritual blessing that you would like to learn more about and experience more fully—such as forgiveness, peace, or hope? Write your response here.
- (2) You may or may not have had a good father. However, God is a perfect father who is available to bless you through Christ. Is there anything that keeps you from having a relationship with your perfect heavenly Father? Will you resolve to talk honestly with God about it before this day ends?
- (3) Fill in the blank here with your name: God wanted _____ to be his very own possession. He wanted _____ to have hope and an inheritance of his spiritual blessings. Now, spend a few moments thanking God for God's big plans—plans that included you.

(A copy of this activity can be downloaded from "Teaching Resource Items" for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org.)

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Display two letters—one written personally to you, and the other a letter to the editor included in the newspaper. Tell the class that generally we can look at letters—even years later—and identify what was

written for a small audience as opposed to a larger audience. After responses, note that biblical scholars strive to determine whether letters from Paul were intended for particular churches and situations or were intended to be passed around from church to church. Point out that most biblical scholars think that the Letter to the Ephesians was intended for the church at Ephesus (in what is now Turkey), but that it was also intended for the church as a whole.

Guide Bible Study

2. Tell the class that in the first three verses of Ephesians we see how Paul identified himself, Christ, and God. Invite someone to read verses 1–3 slowly. Then ask:
 - How did Paul identify himself?
 - How did he identify God?
 - How often did he use the idea of “blessing” in verse 3?
3. Enlist a member to read verses 4–12 while the class listens for whether Paul placed the emphasis on what we did or on what God did. Receive reports. Verse by verse, ask members to list on the board what God did. (For assistance, focus on the verbs that indicate what God did.)
4. Discuss some of the major ideas in these verses:
 - *Adoption*. See the *Study Guide* under the section “The Provision.” Ask, *Why is being adopted by God such a blessing?*
 - *Redemption*. See the *Study Guide* under the section “The Provision.” Ask, *Why is redemption such a blessing?*
 - *Forgiveness*. See the *Study Guide* under the section “The Provision.” Refer to the idea of the scapegoat. Ask, *If sins are carried away—as into the wilderness, away from us—what should be the result in our lives?*
 - *Mystery*. With the class, read the *Study Guide* comments on this word as well. Ask, *How might you paraphrase verse 9?*
5. Acknowledge the difficulty we have in understanding the idea of being chosen (as in verse 4) and predestined (as in verse 11). Together, consider the small article, “God’s Election.”

6. Invite someone to read verses 13–14 aloud.
7. Give this illustration: Amanda looks down at her beautiful engagement ring. It signifies that her fiancé is saying, “I am committed to you and to no other.” Moreover, it also indicates that she will be his wife one day, in a fuller and deeper commitment.
8. Point out that the seal of the Holy Spirit is an even greater indication of a promise. Using information from the *Study Guide* under the heading “The Prompter,” talk about the importance of seals in Paul’s day. Ask, *What does this illustration of the seal show about the role of the Holy Spirit?*

Encourage Application

9. Encourage the class to think in terms of past, present, and future. Lead the class to summarize briefly the ideas they gleaned from Ephesians 1:1–14 by asking the following:
 - In summary, what did God do for us in the past?
 - What is God doing for us now?
 - What will God do for us in the future?
 - Why should any of it matter? What does it mean to you that God chose you to be a part of his family?
10. Close by reading and applying the illustration about the “Golf Club” in the *Study Guide*.

NOTES

1. The author is grateful for insights on this passage from Dr. Timothy Trammell and an unpublished manuscript summarizing his ideas on this passage.
2. Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press and Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 58.
3. Foulkes, 59.
4. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1990), 35.
5. *Our Daily Bread*, October 2, 2007.