

*Are We Building in Love?*  
Ephesians 1  
October 2, 2011  
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### **Getting into Ephesians**

Ever since we studied the book of Acts last fall, a number of you have been asking to study another book of the Bible. You've said that you like the continuity of reading one book at a time; and you like going deeper into that book and trying to better understand its overall message.

Ephesians is different than Acts, of course. Acts is filled with one hair-raising story after another about life in the early church. Ephesians, on the other hand, is a more sedate pastoral letter written to a congregation. It requires more work to unpack its message.

As with any letter, you have to read between the lines to try to figure out what it's saying. This leads to questions: What were the Christians in Ephesus like? What were their joys? Their concerns? Were they able to make a clean break from the past? Were they worried about the future? Was it hard to sit in the same pews with folks who were different—specifically Jews or Gentiles?

I think there's something powerful about reading and studying the Bible together. Many of you readily admit that you struggle to read it alone. So during these 40 days we will gather with other Christians, both at worship and in small groups. Hopefully the word will come alive for us and be relevant for life today.

### **City of Ephesus**

The city of Ephesus was one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire. It was on the Aegean Sea. It had an excellent harbor. It was a cosmopolitan city with a bustling marketplace and great diversity of people. It was filled with glistening marble temples, including the magnificent Temple of Artemis.

According to Acts 19-20, the Apostle Paul spent around 2 years in Ephesus. Paul didn't start the church there, but his ministry was influential in causing it to grow and flourish.

**Chapter 1 is an introduction to the letter.** As I said earlier, this is a pastoral letter. And you know how pastors can be...always waxing on and on about God and other lofty matters. As such, the letter contains a fair amount of flowery language. But *at the heart of it, it's about God's work in building up a church.* As you let the words soak in, I encourage you to read these chapters several times, and in more than one translation.

If you have a bulletin handy, I would ask you to open it up to Ephesians 1.

A quick outline of the chapter:

Verses 1-2 are the **greeting** of the letter

Verses 3-14 are **praise** for what God has done in Jesus.

Verses 15-23 are Paul's **prayer** for the Christians in Ephesus.

### **Greeting – Ephesians 1:1-2**

Most letters, ancient and modern, start with a greeting of some sort. Everything from “To Whom It May Concern” to “Dear John.” Verse 1 begins: *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...May God give you grace and peace.*

A question sometimes comes up: Was the letter really written to the Ephesians? Maybe there’s even an asterisk in your Bible. That’s because some of the oldest manuscripts don’t include the phrase, “*in Ephesus.*” Because the place name is missing, some scholars think this might have been a circular letter. Or perhaps it was written to the church in Ephesus, but then was shared with surrounding congregations. That was a practice common in the ancient world.

It’s not critical that we solve this issue, but for our sake, we’ll simply assume that Paul is writing to the Christians in Ephesus.

### **Praise – Ephesians 1:3-14**

Believe it or not, this section is one long sentence in Greek. Verse 3 says: *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes....*

And on and on and on the sentence goes. Paul was describing God’s incredible love. He got a little carried away. If there had been an English teacher in the crowd, he or she would have gotten after Paul for using a run-on sentence. Then again, Paul was excited. Think of this section as a continuous stream of worship—a really long hymn with 12 stanzas. It’s giving us a first-hand look—an overview—of what God has done for us in Jesus.

**Oftentimes our perspective makes all the difference in the world.** For instance, I enjoy going to the State Fair. I usually make my way to the Midway. The only ride I’ll go on these days is the double Ferris wheel. I love the perspective of the double Ferris wheel, especially when I’m on the top wheel and I can look over the entire fairgrounds. I can see everything from the Grandstands to Sweet Martha’s Cookies to the Miracle of Birth Center. And even though I’ve been to these places many times, everything feels just a little different from the perspective of the Ferris wheel.

Worship is meant to give us a similar kind of perspective. We gather with other believers. We praise and thank God for what God has done for us. In a busy world—where lots of people aren’t making worship a priority—I think we need worship more than ever. We need to be reminded that God has dealt with our past and holds our future secure. We need to be people of praise.

**There are three main emphases in this praise section:**

**1) God chose us.**

We didn't choose God. God chose us...even before the world began. And God did this purely out of love. Verse 5: *God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family.*

**Turn to your neighbor right now and say: God chose you even before the world began.**

That's amazing. It's a mystery. God didn't seem to care if we had our act together. God simply chose us. You might wonder: does that mean God chooses some people and not others? No, that's not the point Paul is making. The point is that God made the first move. We couldn't lift a finger to help ourselves. The rescue we needed had to come from God.

**2) God used Jesus to set us free.**

Verse 7 zeroes in on this thought: *God purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins.*

This language recalls the Exodus from Egypt. The Israelites had been in slavery for over 400 years. They cried out to God. God came, blood was shed, and the people were set free.

So too, we were in slavery to sin. This had been going on ever since the Garden of Eden. We cried out to God. God came, blood was shed, and we were set free.

**Turn to your neighbor now and say: God used Jesus to set you free.**

That's amazing. It's a mystery. Oh, it's not as if our sins and screw-ups aren't important to God. It's not as if God winks and looks the other way. No, God sent Jesus to deal with the harsh reality of a broken world. Through Jesus, the burden of the past has been removed. A new start to life has begun.

**3) Someday God will bring everything together under Christ.**

Verse 9: *God has now revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own pleasure. And this is the plan: At the right time God will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.*

**Turn to your neighbor now and say: Someday God will bring everything together under Christ.**

That's amazing. It's a mystery. I'm not exactly sure what it means. Paul is talking about God's saving help for individual believers, but it's more than that. Paul is talking about unity for badly divided Jewish and Gentile Christians in Ephesus, but it's more than that. Paul is talking about Christians all over the world doing a better job of working together, but it's more than that. Paul is talking about peoples, and governments, and planet Earth, and our solar system, and the Milky Way, and the entire universe...everything, everywhere coming together under the authority of Christ.

This reminds me of that marvelous picture in Philippians 2, where someday "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

## Prayer – Ephesians 1:15-23

Paul closes the chapter with a prayer. It starts in verse 15. It's a prayer for power. Verse 19: *I pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us.* And then Paul adds a truly remarkable claim: *This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead.* Is that the kind of power you have in your life?

Imagine the boldness of this claim: a tiny band of believers meeting in homes; they're huddling in the shadow of the impressive temple of Artemis; despite their humble beginnings, however, they're filled with God's Spirit and claiming a power that rivals the imperial power of Rome. In so many words, Paul is praying that they will understand and put to use the greatest power the world has ever known.

**Why? Why do they need this power? So they might be the church they are called to be.**

Verse 23: *The church is his body; it is made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere with himself.*

This is yet another amazing statement in a chapter full of amazing statements. Paul is saying: If you want to see Christ most clearly, look at his body. And what is his body? The church. In the book of Ephesians, Christ and his church are practically inseparable. Here Paul is at his most idealistic self because you and I both know that the church isn't always very Christ-like.

Still, Paul insists that the church is the hands and feet and voice of Christ. The power he prays for shows up most often up in little hidden ways: acts of kindness, selfless giving, speaking up for the powerless, letting go of the need to get even. Here's the truth: If Christ is ever going to get anything done in this world, it's going to be through his body—people like you and me.

This brings us back to where we started. God chose us even before the world began. God used Jesus to set us free. Someday God will bring everything together under Christ.

What's going on in this letter? God is busy building up the church. We've got work to do. After all, God chose us not simply for our own sake, but for what God might accomplish through us.

This past year, we've been busy being the body of Christ in our little corner of Rochester. Specifically, we've been *creating a place for all to belong.*

How's that been going? This past Wednesday, Lorraine Fiksdal of Zumbro was at the Old Country Buffet. She overheard a conversation by a couple of gentlemen. One of them said, "I've found a great church." The friend's ears perked up, "Where? Who?" The man replied, "Zumbro." Then he added, "They're the most welcoming church I know."

You know what this sounds like? It sounds like God has a building project. It sounds like God wants to build up his church in love. It sounds like—when we live out of that love—we will be the church God has called us to be. Amen.