

BIGGER THAN YOU THINK

SERIES: EPHESIANS: THE
MYSTERY OF CHRIST



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Ephesians 1:1-14
First Message
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Ephesians 1:1-14

How many of you have fallen for clickbait? An article that pops up on a webpage that you can't seem to stop yourself from clicking on. "Man in Wisconsin finds buried treasure—you'll never guess where!" Or "Do mosquitos have the secret to easy fat loss?" I thought about having a whole sermon series with clickbait titles like "5 things to praise God for about salvation—you'll never believe number 4!"

I had some time over the holiday and found myself scrolling through a list of "Things that are bigger than you think." Here are a few examples.

How big is the number 1 billion? It doesn't sound that much bigger than 1 million. But think of it this way: one million seconds is about 11 days. One billion seconds is 31.5 years.

How big is the sun compared to the earth? Much bigger, right? How big is a talon of an eagle?

Today we are starting a new series in the book of Ephesians. Ephesians is a powerful book with rich and deep theology. One of the unique things about the book is that the word mystery is repeated six times, beginning in chapter 1 and ending in chapter 6. We've subtitled this series "The Mystery of Christ" because we hope to immerse ourselves in the mystery of Christ and find out what that means for our lives.

The book begins by jumping right in. In the very first verses, there are huge cosmic themes. We hear about decisions made before time began. We hear about plans to unify everything in heaven and on earth. We get a glimpse into what motivates the God who created the universe. This morning, I want us to see that the gospel story is bigger than you think.

Maybe you've heard a version of the gospel that is about us. Jesus died for us so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven when we die. That's not incorrect, but it is inadequate. It's like saying the ocean is wet. That's true. But if you're in the middle of the ocean and you

can't see land anywhere in the distance, it seems like an understatement to say that the ocean is wet.

It's not enough to say that the gospel of Jesus Christ is about us. It's bigger than we think.

Most of our passage this morning is a praise to God. Verses 3 to 14 are one long blessing on God for what he has done for us. It's all focused on him. But somehow, we learn a lot about who we are through this praise of God.

This passage is about our identity without being about us. Does that make sense? Paul says a lot about who we are, but it's all part of praising God. We have to keep that in mind as we work our way through the text.

This morning, we will look at three major themes in this first section. We'll start with an introduction to the book. Then we'll see how the Father chose us, the Son redeemed us, and the Spirit has sealed us. Notice again that this is about our identity without being about us. Partly that's because the gospel is bigger than we think.

Introduction

Let's start by reading the first few verses.

Ephesians 1:1-2:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There's some debate about who this letter was originally sent to because some of the earliest manuscripts are missing that phrase "in Ephesus." It is simply sent to "the saints who are." That makes sense because the message of this book is broad and general. It could be addressed to anyone. It could be addressed to you.

Big picture, the message of this book has to do with who we are and what that means. One commentator said the purpose was for the readers to "realize their

true identity and behave accordingly.” That’s a very good summary.

There’s a great scene in the 2012 *The Amazing Spider-man* movie. The English teacher, Miss Ritter, says this: “I had a professor once who liked to tell his students that there were only ten different plots in all of fiction.¹ Well, I’m here to tell you he was wrong. There is only one: ‘Who am I?’”

The book of Ephesians is about who we are. The irony is that to truly discover ourselves, we don’t search our hearts or analyze our feelings or take a personality test. Realizing our identity will mean immersing ourselves in the mystery of Christ.

Listen carefully. You will never truly know who you are until you know Christ. Everything about anything goes back to Jesus Christ—Who are we? What happens when you believe in Jesus? What are we doing here Sunday after Sunday? How do we live in our families? Our marriages? Our workplaces? Our world?

All of this is addressed in the book of Ephesians. And all of it has to do with Christ. Nothing is outside of the mystery of Christ. This book is not a manual for living. It is a treatise on how all of life is wrapped up in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Father chose us

As I mentioned, our whole passage this morning is a praise toward God. We’ll see that right away.

Ephesians 1:3-6:

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, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

One of the most prominent ideas in these verses is God the Father choosing us. We see several phrases to that end: “he chose us,” “before the foundation of the world,” “predestined us,” “according to the purpose of his will.”

Sometimes people ask whether I believe in predestination. The question doesn’t really make sense. The Bible is abundantly clear that God has predestined those who believe in Jesus; we can see that in this passage. The question is not “are we predestined?” The question is, “what does it mean that God predestined?” Has he predestined only some? Can people reject his choice? What about those he hasn’t chosen?

These are difficult questions. There are philosophical conundrums and logical tangles to address. But the real challenge of these questions is that they call into question the character of God. Is he really good? Is he really loving? Most of us have wrestled with these questions on some level. For some, they are overwhelming, even causing them to lose their faith.

Here’s what we need to remember. God has told us a lot about how he works. But there is no reason to think that God has revealed everything.

Think of it this way. Imagine that you’re watching the sunset with a five-year-old child. It’s a sweet moment. As the sun goes over the horizon, you say to the child, “Say good night to the sun.” The child waves and then turns to you and asks, “Where does the sun go to sleep at night?”

How do you answer?

Consider that question. There are so many reasons why that question can’t be answered. The sun is not a creature who sleeps. The sun doesn’t go anywhere. The sun doesn’t experience night—we only have night because the sun is hidden from us. You can’t even begin to explain all those things to a child, and you wouldn’t want to. This moment is not meant to be a science lesson.

This happens when we try to answer all the questions we have about God. Some of how God works is revealed to us, but not everything. It’s like we have all these pieces of information, and we try so hard to connect all the dots. But doesn’t it stand to reason that we might not be able to comprehend God fully? As the author Flannery O’Conner said, “A God you understood would be less than yourself.”²

A wise friend of mine once described biblical truths as “islands of certainty in a sea of mystery.” I love that phrase! We have to be careful not to jump off the island of certainty and drown in the sea of mystery.

So let’s look at some of what we absolutely know to be true from this text without getting sidetracked by

what is unclear. I'll highlight three islands. We won't have time to explore these ideas—each island is worthy of a lot more study.

First of all, every reference to us in this passage is plural. God chose us; he predestined us; we should be holy and blameless. When we get to the “you,” even those are plural. We'd say “y'all.” God didn't necessarily choose us as individuals. He chose us as a community.

This is hard for us to grasp because we live in such an individualistic culture. Our communities are transient and temporary. We switch companies, churches, even spouses and families. God chose us, not me. I'm a part of us. But God chose us.

Second, the focus of this language is clear. Salvation rests on the work of God. This is something that God has done. He started it before the foundation of the world. It was his plan all along. He made it happen. God did this, not me.

The Bible is clear: none of us can come to God on our own. Mankind has turned away from God. Salvation has to begin with God, not with us. Our salvation rests on his work, not our own.

Finally, the intended result of this language is to comfort us. Paul doesn't tell us that God chose us in order to put us into a cycle of questions that destroys our faith. That's not the goal. The expected response is comfort.

My wife and I celebrated our 22nd anniversary a few weeks ago. Imagine I take her out to a nice dinner to honor that day. We're sitting at an intimate table with a flickering candle. I look at her and say, “I'm so glad I chose you 22 years ago.”

And she responds, “But what about all those other women you didn't choose?”

What do I say? That's not the point. I'm trying to say something about my relationship with her—her value to me, the depth of my feeling for her.

Three islands of certainty. God's predestination is about us, not just me. The emphasis is that salvation rests on his work, not mine. And the goal is to comfort me, not confuse me.

All of this means we are meant to relax into the grand plan of God. Can you do that? Rest in the Father's work.

We live in a world of choice. Every day is filled with decisions. Some are big, such as moving and taking a new job. Some are small, such as what to have for breakfast. But there is always a choice to be made.

Today, our culture screams at us that we have to choose who we are. Choose your persona. Choose your brand. Choose your gender. Choose your pronouns. Choose your identity. It's all up to you. But this choice is a crushing burden. There is great relief in knowing that it's not actually up to you.

If you believe in Jesus, you need to know that God chose you. Can you hear those words as comfort, not confusion? Can you relax, loosen your muscles, and trust in the purposes of God? As Psalm 46:10 (NASB) says, “Stop striving and know that I am God.” You didn't make this happen. It's not up to you to make sure it continues. This whole thing rests on God, not you.

Rest in the work of God.

The Son redeemed us

Our passage continues by building on the theme of God, having chosen us to talk about the rich theme of redemption.

Ephesians 1:7-12:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, 12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

In this section, we have two similar phrases. “In him we have redemption” and “In him we have obtained an inheritance.” The point of both phrases is similar: because of Jesus, we belong to God. That involves God forgiving our sins and lavishing grace upon us. It involves being given a hope in Christ. All of these are intensely personal ideas.

You belong to God.

What that means is a mystery. These verses contain the first usage of that word in the book. We are told that the “mystery of his will” has been made known to us. That mystery is that God intends to “unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.”

Think about that for a moment. Jesus didn’t just come to die for our sins. He is part of a much bigger plan. The finale of God’s plan is that all things will be united in Jesus Christ. Redemption happens on a cosmic scale. It is much bigger than we think.

At one point last week, I was outside in the snow, and I saw a single snowflake fall on my jacket. The beauty of that snowflake was stunning. Perfectly symmetrical. Did you know that snowflakes almost always have six sides? You see a delicate crystal formation with so much detail and intricacy when you look closely. But then I looked around saw a mound of snow ten feet tall. After one night’s worth of snow, my car was buried; we had cleared the car the day before. Imagine how many of those beautiful intricate snowflakes are in these piles of snow. On one car in one driveway. How many snowflakes do you think fell over the five-day blizzard that dropped ten feet of snow?

You belong to God as a unique individual. Your life is intricate and beautiful, and meaningful. But you are part of something so much bigger that we can’t even imagine it. The cosmos itself is being redeemed through Jesus Christ.

We’ve been studying the book of Ephesians together with several other pastors from Palo Alto. Four churches are all preaching through the same series together. As we studied this passage, one of the other pastors observed, “I want God to be bigger than me, but invested in me.” That’s exactly what this passage describes.

This is why you’ll never know who you are until you know Christ. When we believe in Jesus, we become who we were meant to be. And that happens “in him.” All of us, at some point, are trying to figure out who we are. We find that out in Jesus. Find yourself in Christ.

We’ve had a lot of new babies at PBC lately, and it’s an exciting time. I’ve been talking to many new parents, and one of the main philosophies of parenting that I suggest is to make sure your children know they are not the center of the universe.

It helps children and all of us know that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Mom and dad were there before the children came for most families, and mom and dad will be there after the children are gone. The marriage is the center of the family unit, and the children are in orbit around them.

Sometimes we are tempted to put our kids at the center of the family unit, and everything orbits around them. That’s not healthy. As much as we think otherwise, no one wants to be the center of the universe. It’s just too much pressure.

The same goes for our relationship with Christ. We need to know that we are invited into something much larger than ourselves. The gospel is not about us. It’s for us. We get to be a part of what God is doing on a cosmic scale.

When you think of it that way, all the details of following Jesus make much more sense. I can give my money; I can give my time; I can love people who are difficult to love; I can trust God in hard decisions because all of that is part of a larger purpose.

And this is why this section concludes by pointing forward to how all of this will conclude.

The Spirit sealed us

The last few verses of this passage address one more aspect of what has happened to believers in Jesus.

Ephesians 1:13-14:

In him 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, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

If we are going to be a part of something, we need to know that it is going somewhere. No one wants to join a movement that is just going to fizzle out. Paul communicates that by using the image of a down payment.

When my wife and I moved to Dallas, we bought a house for \$160,000. I know, it’s crazy. This is not an encouragement to move to Texas. To buy that house, we had to put down a down payment of \$32,000.

In part, that down payment demonstrated that we would be able to pay the rest over time. We had enough money at the moment to convince the bank that we'd be able to keep paying the rest.

This is the image Paul uses. The Spirit is given to us now to help us know for certain that this final work of cosmic redemption will come in the future. That means that we can look for the work of the Spirit to assure us for the future. Look for hints from the Spirit.

Here's what I invite you to do. Think back over the past month or so. Maybe you've been reflecting on Psalm 23, as Scott Grant invited us to do last week. Maybe you've experienced something over the Christmas season.

How has the Spirit of God given you something—some kind of down payment—to assure you that this thing is real? It could be small. Sometimes when I'm praying in the morning, I sense the Spirit in the way the wind blows. Sometimes it's how a set of circumstances in my life come together. Sometimes I see the Spirit through the words of a friend.

I've also experienced the Spirit in more powerful ways. I've been freed from addiction to pornography; my marriage has been healed; I've been guided through excruciating decisions. And I've felt the Spirit's presence amidst issues of anxiety.

Each of these, the small and the big, are tiny compared to the overall plan of God. They are reminders, hints, whispers of the grand work of God that I have been swept up into when I discovered my faith in Jesus.

They are not the whole thing—they are not the end of the story. But they remind me that this entire thing is real. God is really doing this. He has chosen me. I have been redeemed, and the Spirit has sealed me.

But maybe you're saying to yourself, "I haven't seen these things." Maybe you look at your life and don't see the Spirit at work. That's what we are here for. The community of God can help each other see the work of God. Maybe someone else can see the Spirit at work in your life. Or perhaps you can see the Spirit in their life. Spend some time in this community, and you will see hints of the Spirit.

These are pointers to what God will do in the future. The Spirit has been given as a down payment. This movement started long before we existed. It is about the will of God to unite all things in Christ. And the end of the process is guaranteed. We have seen enough to know that this is true.

Conclusion

Think back to some of those clickbait images at the beginning of this sermon. I keep coming back to the size of the earth compared to the size of the sun. From my perspective, the earth seems so big! There are seven continents, five oceans, two hundred countries, and some estimates say over 80,000 ice cream shops in the United States alone.³ The earth is big.

Your life is big too. You'll make so many decisions today alone. You'll have so many social interactions and experience a wide range of emotions. Your life is significant and intricate, and detailed, like a snowflake.

But when you put your faith in Jesus Christ, you are swept up into something so much bigger than our day to day. The reality of Jesus changes everything about every moment of our day.

It is a relief to know that God has chosen us. This isn't up to us. We find our true identity when we immerse ourselves in who Jesus is. We are given a demonstration of God's work in our lives through the Spirit in our lives and in the community around us.

I hope you're excited to see how these themes play out in the book of Ephesians. I know I am. We have the incredible chance to explore the mystery of Christ. May it guide us and transform us.

Endnotes

1. "Barbara Eve Harris: Miss Ritter." IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0948470/characters/nm0364458>.
2. "Flannery O'Connor." AZ Quotes, <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/918644>.
3. "How many privately owned ice cream shops exist in USA?" Quora, <https://www.quora.com/How-many-privately-owned-ice-cream-shops-exist-in-USA>.