

Commentary

1-2 Paul begins with a fairly standard greeting to the Ephesian church: 'From Paul, to the church: Grace and peace'. (See e.g. Phil. 1:1-2). It's unlikely that the 'saints' (lit. 'holy ones', Paul's regular description of Christians, ref. 1 Cor. 1:1, etc.) and the 'faithful' are in any way different groups – instead we can assume that the saints *are* the faithful, and vice versa. In all that follows in the letter – especially as Paul describes all the blessings that the Ephesians have received – it's important to remember that he is addressing believers (cf 1:13)

3 Praise to God for every spiritual blessing. Paul is clear that we have *every* spiritual blessing *now!* We must delight in this, and not underplay it. Yet throughout, there is also an erring eye to the future. So...

4-6 Praise for election and adoption. *Now* we are those who *have been chosen* to have, in the *future*, a *perfect physical/bodily filial relationship with God in his presence* (cf. 'holy', 'blameless', 'love' (if this ends v.4, which it may well do), 'adoption'). (See Gal. 4:4-7 and Rom 8:15-17,23 for more info on adoption: we are, by the Spirit, 'children of God' now; our (physical) 'adoption' is future).

7-8 Praise for redemption and the forgiveness of sins. *Now* we have *redemption* and *forgiveness* through the cross (Christ's 'blood').

9-10 Praise for the mystery – God's plan to sum up all things in Christ. *Now* we have a *knowledge* of God's will for the *future* in Christ.

11-14 Praise for the assurance of the believers' heritage. As God's children – as believers – we Gentiles (see 2:11) are *now* his *treasured possession* (v.13-14, NIV, cf. 1 Peter 2:9), just like believing Jews (v.11-12, NIV, v.11 understood as 'chosen by God as his portion', cf. Ex. 19:5; Deut 4:20; 32:8-9) and have an inheritance (v.14). We will receive this in the *future*, but for *now* we have the promised *Holy Spirit* as a wonderful down payment, and a seal of what we shall receive (v.13-14; cf. 4:30).

3-14 See the logical flow of these verses: Praise God for blessing us (v.3)! How has he blessed us? By choosing us to be human people just like Jesus before him, i.e. adoption (v.4-6). How is that possible for transgressors like us, who are not like Jesus? He has redeemed and forgiven us through the cross (v.7-8). Why has he done this? Because his great plan for history is to unite all things in Jesus (v.9-10). How specifically does that work out, in time? Believing Jews are included according to God's covenant faithfulness, and Gentiles get included by hearing the gospel (v.11-14).

Throughout, the phrases '*in Christ*'/'*in him*' (v.3,4,6,7,10,11,12,13 (twice)) show us how God's sovereign purposes for the universe centre on his beloved Son (v.6) – there is no blessing outside of Christ. More than that, through Jesus' incarnation (2:14), ministry (2:17), death (1:7; 2:13-16), resurrection and ascension (1:19-22; 2:4-6) – which are now all *past* events – redemption has been achieved (1:7), and the heavenly kingdom has been inaugurated (1:20-22; 2:4-7). Hence *in Christ* we are given every *spiritual* blessing in the *present* and every *physical* blessing

in the *future*. Since Christ is now exalted in heaven (1:20; 2:6), and all our blessings are in him, our present spiritual blessing is described as being 'in the heavenly places' (v.3, cf. 2:6).

The various references to *predestination* etc. emphasize God's (namely, the Father's, v.2-3) sovereignty over time/history (v.4, 10) and space/geography (v.10), including the effecting of our salvation (v.7). The repeated references to God's 'will' (v.1,5,9,11) show that all things everywhere, at all times, conform to God's intentions. Whilst this often deeply challenges us as we recognise the absoluteness of God's supremacy and sovereignty over us, the right response is to follow Paul in praising God (v.3,6,12,14), since God's complete supremacy and willed initiative is the basis for our salvation being all of grace, and not of our merit, giving us wonderful assurance (v.6-8; cf. 2:4-10).

10 Technically, the sense here is '*unite*' (as ESV) or '*sum up*'/'*recapitulate*' rather than 'bring under one head' (NIV), but, given 1:20-23, it's pretty clear that the *means* by which everything will be united in Christ is that it will be brought under his headship.

The remaining question is as to *what* is united in Christ. Does it mean 'everything, whether or not it's in willing submission to him, i.e. redeemed and unredeemed'? Or 'everything apart from that which is still in rebellion, i.e. only the redeemed'? Tricky one! Arguments for each:

(1) [Redeemed and unredeemed]. (a) In v.7-10, it is the *knowledge* of things being united in Christ which corresponds to the riches of God's grace, not necessarily actually *being united*. So *non-blessed/non-redeemed* things could still be united in Christ. (b) If *everything* were redeemed in Christ, then that might suggest universalism (i.e. everyone is saved), which goes against the Bible as a whole. (c) If 'everything being united in Christ' only corresponds to the redeemed, then it doesn't explain what happens to those who are not redeemed. (d) Phil. 2:9-11 suggests that *everyone* will have to come under Christ's headship, bowing the knee, whether they like it or not.

(2) [Only the redeemed]. (a) The phrases 'in Christ'/'in him' suggest redemption, since that seems to be the emphasis of the section. (b) In Ephesians as a whole, 'united' seems only to correspond to 'redeemed', esp. re united to God and united to each other (2:11-22; 3:6-12; 4:1-6, 11-16, 18, 25, 29-32, etc.) (c) God's plan for redemption does seem to be a 'whole creation' one (1:22-23; 3:9-10; and see the 'parallel letter' Col. 1:15-23, esp. v.20; plus Is. 65:17-25; Rom 8:19-23; Rev 21:1,5). (d) It might be that the unredeemed are not mentioned in God's grand plan here simply because they will be so insignificant in comparison (Is.65:17; a mere 'lake' of fire (Rev. 20:14-15; 21:8) contrasted with a redeemed 'heaven and earth' (Rev.21:1))).

Group Study Outline

Ephesians 1:1-14 Theme Sentence

Praise God that His great plan to unite the whole universe in Jesus includes blessing us!

Launching Question

If we were to ask, "What is the purpose of life?" what answers would the world around us give?

How would those answers affect someone's attitude in life?

READ Ephesians 1:1-14

What is Paul's overriding attitude in life?

(We'll spend the rest of the study trying to work out why that is!)

In summary, why does Paul think God is worthy of praise? (v.3)

What *are* these spiritual blessings, according to the passage?

What are the repeated phrases/ideas in the passage? What do they draw our attention to? (praise, glory, 'in Christ', God's plans, etc.)

Predestination comes up a lot! What is Paul's attitude to it? What does it emphasize? How much can our adoption depend on our abilities?

What's the significance of stressing 'in Christ'? (See 1:19-21; 2:4-6).

Thinking it through

In what ways are we blessed now as Christians, and in what ways in the future?

What is the significance of the Holy Spirit (v.13-14)?

Re-READ Ephesians 1:7-10

What *is* the purpose of life?!

Is it arrogant to think that we know but others don't? Why/why not?

Thinking it through

It's one thing knowing the purpose of life, but why – thinking over everything we've looked at – should that make us happy? What's in it for us?

Wrapping it up

If Christ is at the centre of *God's* plans for everything, is he at the centre of *our* plans for everything?

In what ways do we, like the world around us, live as if life has a different purpose?

In what ways can we live more in recognition of the purpose God has given the universe? ('Being more ready to praise God because of Jesus' seems an important one!)

What reasons do we have for being excited about being a Christian?

Ephesians 1:1-14



Introduction to the main theme

Ephesians is about the church, that is, all different types of Christians brought together under Jesus as head. It is in and through Jesus that (2:19) 'you' (ie Gentiles) are made fellow-citizens 'with the saints' (ie Jews); that 'dividing wall of hostility' (2:14) is broken down and the two made one.

Paul explains the significance of this in cosmic terms: what God has done so far for all Christians, he will one day do for all things – everything brought together under Jesus as head (1:10). God has revealed this ultimate purpose to Christians (1:10), and now the church reveals that same purpose to all the cosmos (3:10), giving notice that God will complete what he intends (1:11). The church now is the nearest thing we have to heaven.

Give what God has done, and given what God intends to do, Paul will spell out how we should behave to preserve this 'unity of the Spirit' so that the church continues to demonstrate how great it is to be living under Jesus as head.

Ephesians 1:1-14 Theme Sentence

Praise God that His great plan to unite the whole universe in Jesus includes blessing us!

Application

- Praise God wholeheartedly and gladly for what he's done for us and will do for us in Jesus!
- There are all kinds of ways in which we're tempted to see our success, relationships, fame, money, comfort, personal sense of usefulness, recognition by others, etc. as the purpose of the universe. We need to recognise the *real* purpose God has given the universe: to unite everything in Christ. And we need to reflect this divine purpose in the way we live day to day.
- When we're feeling discouraged because personal Christian life seems hard, we need to be encouraged by God's unstoppable plans for us (together, as a church). Whereas our plans will often fail to work out the way we want, God's plans always succeed. And this plan includes blessing us in Jesus.