

## Ephesians – Celebrating the Grace and Power of God in a United Church

1.28.24

Spiritual Blessings in Christ

Ephesians 1:1-14

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Recently I was driving in my car and the song **Who Are You** by the British rock band The Who came on the radio. The song is largely about identity and is a great example of how funny a song can be if it is simply spoken and not sung while accompanied by loud instruments. The refrain is:

“Well, who are you? (Who are you? Who, who, who, who?)

I really wanna know (Who are you? Who, who, who, who?)

Tell me, who are you? (Who are you? Who, who, who, who?)

'Cause I really wanna know (Who are you? Who, who, who, who?)

Other than sounding like an owl and being incredibly repetitive there is no mistaking the question the song asks: **Who Are You?**

How would you answer that question? How do you describe or define yourself? What categories or words would you use? We might use words related to our relationships: I’m a son, a brother, a husband, a father, a friend. We could use terms related to what we do and our interests, “I’m a pastor, or an artist, a plumber, a teacher, an engineer, a businessperson, an electrician, a student.” As we think longer about who we are we might add other words that affiliate us with groups or organizations to which we belong including the church, a musical group, a sports team, a service organization, or even a nation. We might use words related to our skills, talents, gifts, or personality. **Who are you?** One of the challenging things about answering this question is that some of the basic ways we define ourselves can be taken away. Jobs can be lost or changed, or we may retire. People we love in important relationships pass away. At one point I was a grandson and a son, but my grandparents and parents have all died so I don’t feel like a grandson or son in the way I once was.

As I listen to people and observe our culture at large it seems there are many people who don’t know who they are or whose they are. **It’s helpful and wise to review the bedrock source of our identity, the foundation of who we are, so that we have clarity and confidence even in the most difficult of circumstances.** The Apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians begins with a rich passage that has a great deal

to say about **who we are and whose we are**. Who are we in Christ? What do we have in Christ? What have we received, obtained, and how are we to live as a result?

In Ephesians, Paul argues that **right thinking leads to right living**. To live out God's will for our lives, we must first understand who we are **in Christ**. Paul **summarizes the whole Gospel story and how it should reshape every part of our life and he begs the church to be unified in every way**. He begins in chapter one by sharing the many blessings God has graciously given us **in Christ**. The spiritual blessings we receive **in Christ** establish **our unshakeable identity as beloved children of God. That's who we are**.

Listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 1:1-14.

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

<sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup> **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**, <sup>4</sup> just as he **chose us in Christ** before the foundation of the world to **be holy and blameless before him in love**. <sup>5</sup> He **destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will**, <sup>6</sup> to the **praise of his glorious grace** that he **freely bestowed on us in the Beloved**. <sup>7</sup> In him we have **redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses**, according to **the riches of his grace** <sup>8</sup> that he **lavished on us**. With all **wisdom and insight** <sup>9</sup> he has **made known to us** the mystery of his will, **according to his good pleasure** that he set forth **in Christ**, <sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things **in him**, things in heaven and things on earth. <sup>11</sup> **In Christ** we have also **obtained an inheritance**, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, <sup>12</sup> so that we, who were the first to set our hope **on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory**. <sup>13</sup> **In him** you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed **in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit**; <sup>14</sup> this is the pledge of our **inheritance** toward redemption as God's own people, **to the praise of his glory**."

Ephesians is a **celebration of the Grace and Power of God in a United Church**, which is what we want to be. Since we're going to be hearing from Ephesians for the next eight weeks, I want to give you some background to help you understand the context of this letter.

**In the New Testament, the city of Ephesus and the Ephesians are mentioned more than twenty times.** The city of Ephesus was one of the largest and most important cities in the ancient Mediterranean world, lying on the western coast of Asia Minor in modern day Turkey. It was one of the oldest Greek settlements on the Aegean Sea, and later was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. It was a center of worship of all kinds of Greek and Roman gods especially the Greek goddess Artemis who was the goddess of hunting, (she is usually portrayed with a bow and arrows), wild animals, forests, chastity, and midwifery. The magnificent temple of "Ephesian Artemis," was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. According to **Acts 18:19–21**, Paul sailed from Corinth in Greece to Ephesus with **Priscilla (Prisca) and Aquila** for his first visit there. It was in Ephesus that the couple instructed and disciplined **Apollos** who became a church leader (**Acts 18:24–26**). Paul returned to Ephesus on his third missionary journey which you can read about in **Acts 19:1–20:1**, and he **stayed for more than two years**, dividing his time between his tent-making business and preaching, teaching, and leading many people to become followers of Christ. He spent more time in Ephesus than any other place he served.

According to **Acts 19:23–41**, the silversmiths in Ephesus rioted because the faith Paul was preaching threatened their income from making miniature idols of Artemis, because if you believed in the God Paul preached, you didn't worship idols anymore. Paul's companions, Gaius, and Aristarchus were forcibly dragged into the theater before the town clerk was able to calm the mob. Later, on his way back to Jerusalem, Paul met with the elders of Ephesus (**Acts 20:16–38**) and they lamented, wept, and prayed together because they knew they would never see Paul again. The presence of Paul's companion Trophimus, an Ephesian or a Gentile Greek, was the reason for a riot by Jews in the Jerusalem Temple and the arrest of Paul in **Acts 21:27–22:30**.

Years later, Paul's letter to the Ephesians was written while he was in prison (see Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; 6:20), probably at about the same time as the Letter to the Colossians. The letters share many of the same phrases and expressions. Ephesians is an example of a "circular letter," copies of which were distributed by Tychicus (see 6:21-22) to several churches in the region.

The first three chapters of Ephesians are Paul's summary of the Gospel story. Paul begins his letter with a beautiful Jewish style poem where Paul praises God the Father for the amazing things he has done **in Christ**. From eternity past, God's purpose was to choose and bless a covenant people. Think of the family of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12:1-3. Paul says, now, through Jesus anyone can be adopted into that family. Paul reminds the Ephesians of their huge privilege in belonging to Jesus, (1:4), because God "*chose us **in Christ** before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.*" In love. **Twelve times in Ephesians chapter one**, there is an iteration of the phrase **in Christ**, emphasizing strongly all the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ because of God's love for us. There were originally twelve tribes in Israel, and Paul mentions twelve times how in Christ, Jews, and Gentiles, are now all invited to be part of God's large multi-ethnic family.

Paul says God "*destined us for adoption as his children **through Jesus Christ**.*" God's plan all along was to have a very large family. The Ephesians know that God must really love them to voluntarily choose to adopt them. In their world, adoption is a huge privilege and gift, and it is still life altering for people today. Several families in our church serve or have served as foster families and some of those families have chosen to adopt children in their care. I attended one adoption ceremony at the Barnstable County Courthouse. Alicia White's father was the presiding judge and he spoke eloquently about how nice it was in a courtroom where he had to deal with difficult situations, to see and feel the love and joy as a family formally welcomed a little child into their family forever. Imagine that joy multiplied millions and billions of times over as people hear, learn, and discover that in Christ a loving God wants to adopt them as beloved children into a family of people from every nation, language, and tribe.

Not only that, but Paul also says Jesus' death covers our worst sins, our worst failures and in Jesus we find God's grace and God's grace has opened a new way to

understand every part of our lives. In verse 10 Paul says God's purpose was to unify all things in heaven and on earth under Christ which is a title that means Messiah. God's plan was always to have a huge family of restored human beings who are unified in Jesus the Messiah. Paul says this divine purpose became clear when we Jews were first made into that family, then Paul says you all heard about salvation in Christ and you all have also been brought into God's family by the work of the Holy Spirit, and here Paul is referring to the stories in the Book of Acts starting with the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit came upon believers from many different places and about how God's Spirit has brought together Jews and non-Jews into one family in Jesus just as God promised Abraham long ago.

While the word "trinity" doesn't appear in the Bible, the three persons we call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are described in Ephesians 1:3-14 as working in perfect harmony to make it possible for people who were formerly alienated from God to be transformed into God's beloved children. Notice in the poem in chapter one how Paul first speaks of the work of God the Father, then of the Son, and then of the Holy Spirit.

It is amazing to look carefully at these verses and try to list everything that God has done for us or given us. If you have your own Bible that you can underline or highlight, feel free to do so; or maybe write some of these words or phrases on the back of your bulletin. <sup>3</sup> God has **blessed us** in Christ **with every spiritual blessing** God **chose us** in Christ to **be holy and blameless before him in love**. God **adopted us** as his children through Jesus Christ, simply because he wanted to. **God freely bestowed glorious grace upon us**.

<sup>7</sup> In Christ **we are beloved**, we have **redemption** through his blood, **forgiveness**, **the riches of his grace** <sup>8</sup> that he **lavished on us**.

With **all wisdom and insight** <sup>9</sup> he has **made known to us** the mystery of his will, <sup>11</sup> In Christ we have also **obtained an inheritance**,

<sup>12</sup> **so that we might live for the praise of his glory**.

<sup>13</sup> We **were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit**;

<sup>14</sup> this is the pledge **of our inheritance** toward redemption **as God's own people**, to **the praise of his glory**."

**If we can truly grasp all that God has done for us, it has the power to give us an unshakeable sense of identity, worth, and value.**

God has blessed, chosen, adopted, and bestowed glorious grace upon us. **Who are you? You are a blessed, chosen, child of God and the beneficiary of God's glorious grace.** This is not a purple dinosaur telling you that you're special, this is the God of the universe telling you that.

What about Christ? If we're feeling lonely, guilty, or poor, we're to remember that **in Christ we are beloved, redeemed, forgiven, and the recipients of a great inheritance.** Some of us may have been the beneficiary of an inheritance from a parent or grandparent. It might have been small or large, sentimental or of great material value. It might have been the values they modeled and lived by more than any money they may have left us. When you receive an inheritance, the question you face is, how will I use it? We can squander an inheritance very quickly like the younger son in a parable Jesus tells in Luke 15 so that what we received is gone in no time. Or we can make a different choice.

In Ephesians 1, Paul says God and Christ have given us this invaluable inheritance so that *"marked with the seal of **the promised Holy Spirit**; we, as God's own people, **might live for the praise of his glory.**"* Our response to all God has done in Christ is to choose to devote ourselves to living for the praise of God's glory. When it comes to our identity, allowing God's word as well as the words of people we love, trust, and respect who have our best interest at heart shape our sense of self is healthy and wise.

**Who are you?** I really want you to know that you can be **a child of God, a disciple of Jesus, and part of the community of people who live for the praise of God's glory.** Those are things that we can build on, rely on, and depend on, for the rest of our lives. They are foundational to our identity.

Ephesians tells us what God has done for us in Christ and how much each of us has been given and how valued and important every person is to the Lord. The truly amazing thing about our identity in Christ is that we don't earn it, it is offered to us as a gift. **Our task is to believe it, receive it, and live as though it is true.** In response to who Jesus is and to all God and Christ have done we can live confidently knowing who we are.

**Who are you? You are a child of God, a disciple of Jesus, one of God's own people.** No matter what else may be taken away or lost during our life, those are things that we can build on, rely on, depend on and trust, for the rest of our lives and beyond. With the help of the Holy Spirit may we know with unshakeable faith who we are and whose we are and live with gratitude for all the spiritual blessings God has given us in Christ.

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. If someone asked you, who are you? How would you answer that question?  
What other people, relationships, or roles might you include in your answer?
2. Paul says in Ephesians 1 that from the beginning, God's plan was to adopt you and as many people as possible into God's family as beloved children. How do you respond to the stunning news that God loves you that much?
3. In Ephesians 1:1-14, we hear about all three members of the trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working together in perfect harmony. In Ephesians 1:3-6 notice all that God the Father does to accomplish our salvation. What does God do?
4. In verses 7-12, Paul focuses on the work of the Son. Who are we in Christ? What do we have in Christ? What have we received, obtained, and how are we to live as a result?
5. In Ephesians 1:13-14, we're told the Holy Spirit is the seal and guarantee of our spiritual inheritance. How does the Holy Spirit make our salvation, which God initiated, and the Son accomplished, real in our lives?
6. After listing all that God and Jesus have done for us, Paul invites and challenges the community of faith in Ephesus to live for the praise of Christ's glory. What does living for the praise of Christ's glory look like for our church?