

## **Lift Up Your Head**

### **Ephesians 1:1-14**

We are going to begin a new sermon series today that will take us through the rest of the summer. In thinking about what would be a good direction for us to go I wanted to change gears from preaching out of the OT from historical narrative accounts to preaching from the NT and focusing on a portion of Scripture that had a little more theology. I think it's good for us to hear practical sermons like the Abraham series, but I think it's also good for us to hear theological sermons to really make us think deeper about God. So I've chosen to do a systematic study through the book of Ephesians for the next 8 weeks.

Ephesians is one of Paul's many letters he wrote in the NT, but scholars point out that it's unique because it wasn't written to point out any major flaws or confront any heresy or bad behavior like most of his other letters were. It's more of a broad overview of what the Christian life is all about. From what I can tell it was written to relatively new Christians who were coming out of a culture and lifestyle that had no Christian influence until Paul first came and preached the gospel. So it was a continuation of Paul's teaching about a whole new way of thinking and living based on the truth God revealed. For them I think it would have been very exciting, encouraging, and no doubt challenging to read.

For us who already have a Christian background, I hope it will serve to be very encouraging and challenging as well because even though we may know a lot of things about what it means to be a Christian, we easily forget and get distracted, caught up in everything going on in our lives and in the world and we lose our passion and zeal for what the Christian life is all about. I've been gone a lot in the past 6 weeks and one of the benefits of getting away is it gives me the opportunity to get my head out of the sand of the daily grind and regain a big picture perspective on what life is really about. It's refreshing and invigorating and my hope is that as we study through the pages of Ephesians, it will have the same effect.

To begin this morning we are going to look at the first 14 verses and these verses can often have a bogging down effect on people because of a few words that Paul uses and people can get so hung up on those words and trying to figure them out that they miss the wonder of all that Paul is saying. So we're going to avoid that this morning and come away with what I hope Paul would want us to come away with, which is encouragement and excitement about all that God has done for us.

In order to understand the book of Ephesians you have to understand the people Paul was writing to. For those of you who aren't familiar with Paul, he was a missionary that came on the scene shortly after Jesus ascended into heaven. At first he was a violent persecutor of the church, but through a miraculous transformation of his heart he became a follower of Christ and a highly influential missionary in the area known as Asia Minor. (Picture) He took at least three missionary journeys throughout the Roman provinces on the north side of the Mediterranean Sea and on the second journey he came to the city of Ephesus which was located on an inland harbor of the Sea.

Ephesus was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia and at the time of Paul it was a wealthy, prosperous, and highly populated, beautiful city. Today it lay in ruins because of military invasion and because the inland harbor filled with silt and became useless, so it wasn't rebuilt. But its ruins are very incredible to behold, revealing its former glory. The most central characteristic of the city which is what the city was known for and what brought it wealth and prosperity was its temple to the goddess Artemis (Picture). Artemis, also called 'Diana,' was a goddess of fertility and was believed to protect people's fertility (Picture). The worship of Artemis was universally influential in that city and surrounding area. It was a central foundation of people's lives. It affected how they thought about life and how they lived and she was their pride and joy. (Asia Minor Map)

The people had no Christian influence. There was a Jewish synagogue in town and a small Jewish population that would have been familiar with the OT and God, but the rest of the people who were Gentiles had no clue. They were indoctrinated by the cult of Artemis, they were influenced by demonic spirits and many practiced magic arts. Paul describes them in chapter 2 as being dead in their trespasses and sins, following the course of the world and the prince of the power of the air, living in the passions of their flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind.

So in about 54A.D. Acts 18 records that Paul stopped in Ephesus for just a few days as he was traveling back toward Antioch from Greece at the tail end of his second missionary journey. He spent those days reasoning with the Jews in the synagogue and they were interested in what he had to say and wanted him to stay longer, but he couldn't. So when he went out on his third missionary journey, getting back to Ephesus was his top priority. When he arrived that time Acts 19 records that he spent the first three months in the synagogue, reasoning with the Jews and some believed, but there was also opposition. So he decided to move on from there and ended up teaching in a place called the Hall of Tyrannus for a remarkable 2 years. It was the longest Paul ever stayed in one city. And his

ministry was very influential. Acts 19:10 says that “*all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.*” Many believed and many renounced their worship of Artemis and the practice of magic arts.

Eventually, the spread of the gospel made such an influence that the silversmiths and merchants involved in making and selling idols were losing money, so they caused an uproar in the city against Paul and he was forced to move on. But he had planted a strong church that continued to worship the Lord after his departure. They even had elder leadership in the church by the time he left. A few months later he stopped in Ephesus again and met with the elders before moving on to Jerusalem. It was there that he was arrested and detained in various cities for 5 years, ending up in Rome. And it was from there that he wrote this letter to send to Ephesus.

In the letter Paul indicates that they were losing heart because of his chains – chains they knew he bore because of his decision to preach the gospel to them – the Jews in Jerusalem considered them unclean Gentiles and unworthy to be included in God’s kingdom and they hated Paul for his ministry among them. That’s why he was arrested and imprisoned. So the relatively new believers in Ephesus were discouraged because of that, probably feeling like second class citizens of the Kingdom of God because they were Gentiles, carrying the memories and baggage of their former sins and way of life, and under attack by the accusations of the spiritual forces of evil in their area who would condemn them as being unfit for the kingdom of heaven because most of them were nothing more than ‘dirty rotten Gentiles.’

You have to put yourself in their shoes to really understand the significance of what Paul writes to them in this letter and that why I think the first 14 verses would have been so encouraging, uplifting, and powerful for them to hear as they eagerly listened to what their beloved pastor would have to say.

Read Ephesians 1:1-4.

*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> even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.*

Listen, you aren't worthless, pagan, throw-away Gentile sinners. You were chosen by God before the foundation of the world... chosen to be holy and blameless before him. He knew you and had plans for you long before you ever came to be – long before the great city of Ephesus even existed. You are precious to him. In chapter 2 verse 10 he calls them God's masterpiece or workmanship.

If you've ever undertaken a major art or building project, you know the time and care and effort that goes into it. You see it in your mind and imagine what it will be, you get excited about it. You make careful plans and get everything in place so that when it's time you can move forward and create that masterpiece just as you wanted it to be. And you delight in your creation. This is what God has done for each of his people. There are days when we may feel like we're nothing more than a mess, but when God looks at us he sees his masterpiece that he chose in Christ at the very beginning and is molding and shaping in his own special way and will bring to completion on the final Day.

Read Ephesians 1:5-6.

*In love <sup>5</sup> he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, <sup>6</sup> to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.*

You Gentiles are not last minute exceptions that God reluctantly allowed into his kingdom to be his slaves. Nor are you second-class, lower-tier citizens of God's household behind his favorite children – the Jews. You were loved and predestined to be adopted as sons (and daughters) through Jesus according to God's purpose and will – he wanted you from the very beginning and purposed to have you for his very own as his beloved children!

I've never picked out a puppy, but I know several people who have. Many times what happens is that person goes to look at the puppies when they are only a few weeks old – too young to leave their mother. They do that because they want to pick out the one they want to take into their home and into their family and love as their own. Then they leave again and wait a few more weeks until that puppy is weaned and ready for them to take as their own. They return when the time is right and adopt that puppy into their family. These puppies aren't the leftovers; they are the ones that the owners wanted and purposed to get. This is what God has done for us, he loved us before we belonged to him and in that love he predestined us to be adopted into his family as his beloved children. What glorious grace with which he has blessed us in the Beloved!

Read Ephesians 1:7-10.

*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, <sup>8</sup> which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

You Gentiles aren't condemned because of your sins any longer as the Accuser wants you to think. In Christ you have been redeemed – purchased out of bondage to sin. You have been forgiven all your trespasses and sins. This God has done because of the riches of his grace, which he has lavished upon us. In his wisdom and understanding he made known to you the mystery of his will. This was according to his purpose to unite all things in him in heaven and on earth, which he set forth in Christ as was his plan at just the right time.

When Amy and I graduated from college we each had over \$10,000 in debt – a heavy burden to bear for a youth pastor and new wife who was still looking for a job. So we began to pay the lending companies for my debt, and at the time it felt like a big payment. What made it worse is we knew it was only half of what our payments would be. But after a few months we hadn't seen a bill for Amy's debt, and though this was nice we knew we couldn't just ignore it. So Amy called her parents to get the bank information and get things set up for us to begin to make the payments, but when she called do it they said, "Well, we looked at how much you'd end up paying in interest, so we just decided to pay the whole thing off for you..." Really?! The debt was already paid? Yes it was. We thought we'd have to pay twice as much as we were already paying but in just a few moments all that weight was lifted. Her debt was completely gone.

Satan wants us to think we still have a debt to pay and he's really good at that. But in Christ we have been completely set free – all our sins have already been paid for at the cross and we are completely forgiven. God did this for us by the riches of his grace as part of his plan to unite all things together in Christ.

Read Ephesians 1:11-12.

*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, <sup>12</sup> so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.*

You Ephesians do not need to succumb to discouragement and despair because of the circumstances around you. The best is yet to come. God has the end always in

mind – our praise of his glory on the Day of Christ’s return, and because of that, God, who works all things according to the counsel of his will, predestined us to obtain a glorious inheritance in Christ. Though the present time may have seemed dark and overwhelming to them because Paul was in chains and the spiritual forces of evil were at work all around, they had an incredibly bright future to set their hope on!

When you’re going on a vacation a long ways away, the drive to your destination is always a lot easier than the trip back home. Why? Because when you’re headed out, the excitement and adventure of the vacation is ahead of you. You are looking forward to it so much that the long trip in the car doesn’t get you down. God has given us that gift as well in Jesus Christ as we travel through the long and oftentimes difficult journey of this life. There’s always an unbelievable bright future for us to look forward to! As bad as things might get, they will come to an end and when that happens we will experience fullness of joy and happiness that we never dreamed was possible!

Read 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,<sup>14</sup> who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.*

You Ephesians don’t need to fear that you won’t ever make it. Yes, the road may be difficult and more than what you can bear, but you are not alone! On the day you heard the gospel and believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit who is God’s down payment of our full redemption. He is the guarantee that we will make it to the end and receive our glorious inheritance.

Last summer Sophia babysat for us on the days that both Amy and I had to work. Her payment for a day of babysitting was the thing she loves most – ice cream – a large Blizzard at Dairy Queen (which we still owe her quite a few...) Some of the days her job was easier than others because the kids were more quiet and compliant, but other days it was difficult and she wanted to quit. When that happened we knew there was one way to lift her spirits – we’d take her to Dairy Queen and get her a Blizzard. It had a powerful, mood-altering affect. All the sudden she remembered what was waiting for her and had strength to continue on. God has done that for us by giving us the Holy Spirit – he is a foretaste of the future glory that awaits us and his presence in our lives right now gives us the strength to carry on until the day of redemption.

As the people of Ephesus heard the beginning of this letter and were reminded of all these incredible blessings from God, I'm sure it lifted them up in their spirits and gave them tremendous encouragement and hope. Even though Paul was in prison and the darkness of sin was still very oppressive in their city, they were not forgotten. Paul reminded them that they were chosen by God to be holy and blameless, predestined to be adopted as his sons and daughters, redeemed and forgiven because of the grace of God, given an awesome inheritance that they could always look forward to, and sealed with the Holy Spirit as the guarantee that they would take possession of it.

The same blessings are true for each of us as well who have heard the gospel and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Though the circumstances you are in may have you down and discouraged, these incredible blessings can never be taken away. So rather than hanging our heads in discouragement or complacency we must lift them up and rejoice in all the blessings that are ours in Christ. May the Lord fill your hearts with joy in hearing these things today!