

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Ephesians 1:1-14

To begin our examination of Ephesians, let's get a little technical. I realize that getting all grammatical, theological, and hermeneutical right off the bat may be a bit of a turn off, but it is important in understanding how the apostle Paul typically writes. Here's a simple little axiom to help you remember: *"The indicative precedes the imperative"*. Indicative and imperative are verb moods (see, I told you we would be getting technical.) As commentator Bill Muehlenberg writes, *The indicative mood indicates or expresses an objective fact or reality. It makes a statement or asks a question. It is declarative, denoting a simple assertion or interrogation. It is the mood of certainty. As to the New Testament, the indicative refers to what God has done for believers in Christ. It declares the reality of what Christ has done for us...The imperative mood in contrast expresses a command, an order, an entreaty, a request or an exhortation. It is the mood of volition. Theologically, the imperative calls on believers to live in a certain way, for example, in a Godly manner...Of interest, the imperative usually flows from and depends upon the indicative. In a theological context, first we have the theological proclamation, and then we have the moral exhortation. The "indicative-imperative" relationship can be expressed like this: "God has done this, therefore you should do that."*

This is a staple rhythm of Paul's writings, and it's crystal clear in the letter to the Ephesians. Most of the first three chapters is indicative, while most of the last three chapters are imperative. This is important because if we only focus on the imperative (i.e. the commands, rules) it is easy to slide into legalism and religiosity. The indicative gives us the truth and foundation, the WHY, on which to build our response. And, like we always say, God initiates, we respond. So Paul helps his readers to understand what God has done, and how we can/should respond.

After his initial greetings Paul lays out the longest sentence in the New Testament (by English standards, a run-on sentence...which many translators break up, but in reality, verses 3-14 in Greek is one sentence.) Throughout this letter we want to keep an eye out for the phrase *"in Christ"* (or *"in Him"*, *"in whom"*, etc.). This is the key indicative of the entire letter...we are in Christ.

In verses 3-14 Paul outlines blessing after blessing that has been lavished upon us who are in Christ. Something to take note of is that though Paul states that we have been blessed with *"every spiritual blessing"*, he does not list EVERY spiritual blessing. In other words, while this is an impressive list of blessings, it is NOT exhaustive but representative. (To actually list EVERY spiritual blessing would be a very large book, indeed.) But let's look at the blessings Paul does outline for us:

God chose us, predestined us, made us holy and blameless, adopted us, redeemed us, forgiven us, made known to us the mystery of His will, given us an inheritance, sealed us with His Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance. WOW! The proper response to these incredibly generous blessings is Praise...which never seems to be far from Paul's lips as he considers the blessings of God, and focuses his readers on God's blessings.

Q. List all the blessings you see outlined in this passage. Can you think of other blessing that Paul didn't mention?

Q. Of the blessings listed, which means the most to you presently?

If you were to read this passage in the various translations/versions available, you'd likely catch different nuances, and maybe different ways of understanding various statements that Paul wrote. Though it might be tempting to ask the question, "Which translation is the most right/accurate?" that could easily become an exercise in missing the point. Regardless of the various ways this sentence/passage can be worded, Paul wanted his readers to grasp that God the Father loves us and has richly and abundantly showered us with His grace and goodness. How is this possible? Through Jesus (much more of this will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.) And in case it sounds too good to be true, we have the Presence and work of the Holy Spirit in/with us to witness/testify to the truth of it all (this, too, will be elaborated upon...this is just the introduction after all.)

Exercise: Read this passage in a few different translations/versions. What differences do you notice? What new insights do you gain? (Again, don't be overly concerned about which translation/version is "the best" ...translators do the best they can...don't miss the overall point.)

Q. If you could describe/articulate the point of this passage in one sentence, how would you say it?

Q. As you reflect on this passage, allowing the truth/reality of it to penetrate your heart...how do you want to respond?

Q. When you think of "praising God" what do you want to praise Him for? (Or, why do you want to praise Him?)

As we get caught up in all the blessings that are lavished upon us—and as we make our way through a rather complicated sentence—it's easy to miss Paul's statement of what God is ultimately up to in verse 10...that is, to gather up (or sum up, or unite) all things in heaven and earth in (or under) Christ (this is actually a much more significant detail and priority than how we've been blessed.) This has been God's plan all along, and this is the future in which we are headed. This being the case, union with Christ is THE MOST IMPORTANT matter/issue. Whatever other matter that can occupy our minds, hearts, actions, time...our union with Jesus is the most vital. This is the "heart check" of this passage: do any of the spiritual blessings even matter if we don't desire to be, and enjoy being, in union with Christ?

Q. It is perhaps tempting to think of all these "spiritual blessings" abstractly and conceptually instead of practically and concretely. As you reflect on this passage, what practical difference do these "spiritual blessings" have in your/our life? (Don't worry if you struggle with this a little...the whole rest of the letter helps flesh it out.)

Q. What difference does it make to know that God has made known to us what He's up to (see verses 9-11)?

Q. What activities or descriptions in this passage relate to the Father, to Jesus, and to the Holy Spirit?

A couple of key words at the end of this passage are important to take note of. Paul states that we are “sealed” with the Holy Spirit. A seal would authenticate ownership. The idea that we belong to God is compounded by Paul saying that we are God’s “possession”. (The use of the word “redemption”, i.e. being purchased by someone, also adds to the idea that we are owned by someone.)

Q. It is very popular in western thought to think that we are our own person. But this doesn’t jive with the story of Scripture. We are either slaves to sin (thus not our own), or we belong to God (again, not our own). What do you think, how do you feel, about the idea that you are not your own?