

Text: Ephesians 1.1-14
St Stephen's

July 10/11, 2004
Sat PM/Sun AM

The Chosen

If a tourist came up to you and said “**Take me to where the action is**”, would you take them to church? There is not much of a hint that we would – or should. The **headlines** are concerned with other matters. The best **advertising** space points towards other options. The **talk shows** are focused on other issues.

Sometimes we think the **church is pretty insignificant**. I remember an early Vestry meeting in my first church where we spent 2 hours talking about whether we were going to put aluminum or copper gutters on the fellowship hall. Two hours. Gutters! It made me think, “Something is missing here”. No one was walking around town saying our little church was “were the action is.”

But if you met Paul during his 3 year ministry in Ephesus and asked him to “take you where the action is” in that city of some 250,000 people, he would have pointed you to a little Christian congregation – and he would have been right.

Ephesians is considered by many as the **greatest** of Paul's letters. Today we start a **new sermon series** called “The Forever Kingdom” on this remarkable 6 chapter letter. For the rest of the summer we are going to listen to its words and capture its heartbeat. I think by the time we are through, you will believe it was a letter **written for us**, and you will find yourself caught up in a way you probably hadn't imagined – in the most significant movement in the universe - “Christ's Forever Kingdom”

Background:

When Paul wrote this letter about AD 61, he has been a Christian for some 30 years, and has completed 3 missionary trips, planting churches. Ephesians was written as a circular letter to a number of these small churches that Paul had founded. As he writes, they are **struggling**. Their leadership has taken a hit; Paul himself had been arrested and was in a minimum security prison awaiting trial (Acts 28.30). He wrote to the Philippians that... “*I am in chains for Christ.*” (Php 1:13)

Almost all of these churches appeared weak and vulnerable. When Paul left them at the end of his 3 year ministry, he said,

I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Acts 20:29

He was right. Each of his young churches came **under attack** from within and without. It would be easy for these little churches to think they were **pretty insignificant**. Paul thought otherwise. He believes they are at the center of the most remarkable movement in the history of the universe, God's "Forever Kingdom." Paul believes that...

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for.
Eph 1:11 (The Message)

That is why he wrote this letter. To help us get started, I want to begin the series by giving you **three themes** from Paul's opening paragraphs especially written for people who don't think their lives – or their churches are very significant.

1) **We Are Resourced with Heavenly Riches**

I know a lot of people who think they don't have the resources they need to meet life's challenges. Paul says if you are a Christian, you've got more than enough. God promises to **meet the resource challenge** in our lives. In the **Old Testament** (Deut 28.1-14) the **blessings** that God promises his people are mostly **material**: many children, a special land, plenty of rain, good crops, lots of cattle and sheep, and leadership among the nations. When **Jesus came** he assured his followers that they had a real Father, who would provide for their needs... But the major thrust of his promises and his covenant are for **spiritual**, not material blessings.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Eph 1:3 (NIV)

The phrase "spiritual blessing" is Paul's way of emphasizing that our wealth is primarily **spiritual** and not **material**.

These blessings are greater than any wealth the world has to offer. **Forgiveness** and his **Holy Spirit**. Being a part of his **family** and having his **peace** in the middle of the storm and having the certain hope of **eternity**. You can lose a lot in life and count yourself very wealthy if you have these. This is the wealth above all wealth that I want for my family... that I want for my community... that I want for myself.

Would you look at the verse on your outline and **circle the word “every”**. It is **all there**. Every spiritual blessing that is in Christ is given to you. Nothing is held back. And then we grow in them.

What are these “spiritual blessings”?

As Paul begins to describe them, something funny happens. **Verses 3-14** in this chapter are a single long sentence in the original language. As a matter of fact it is the longest sentence of any of the known works written in ancient Greek. Paul runs phrase into phrase in a spectacular, ascending spiral as he tries to list every spiritual blessing we’ve received. His heart is bursting in praise and he can barely find the language to put it all down. To sort it out, I want to use as a key **the tense of his verbs** as he looks at what Christ has given us. He says our riches ...

- **Are Anchored In The Eternal Past:**

Paul starts his list by **looking back**... way back before Christ came, before the nations formed, before the great flood in the days of Noah. He looks back before our great ancestors were created in the garden of Eden, even before the earth was formed, even before the stars and the galaxies were created in their majestic orbits! In that eternal beginning, **before God created any single thing, he did something**. He formed a **plan** in his mind, a **purpose** in his heart, and he made a **decision** in his will - that has to do **with you and with Christ**. He says...

he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will...

Eph 1:4-5

Many people have a hard time with what the bible teaches about election (that is the theological term for God’s choosing us) and predestination. We ask, “Didn’t I choose Jesus?” “Didn’t I exercise my free will?” “Do you mean to tell me that God chose me before I chose him, and he over-ruled by free will?” And then we **get offended** about it.

We are on **holy ground** here, where the sovereign determination of God meets human free will. We don’t like the idea that God’s choice might overrule our choice. The answer to our questions is that we did choose Christ. But only because God first chose us to belong to him.

Somebody once explained it to me like this. When you begin to think about coming to Christ and entering his great kingdom, you see **the doorway** in front of you. As you look at it from the outside, there are **words** of invitation written over the top.

Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and take the free gift of the water of life.

Re 22:17

But once you walk through the door of faith, once you yield to Christ and step into his forever kingdom, at some point you turn and **look back on that same doorway**. On the inside you see **a different set of words written over the top**. It's a quote from Jesus, and it says,

You did not choose me, but I chose you Jn 15:16

Then you begin to realize that **it is all his doing**. Before I **thought** of him, he thought of me. Before I **chose** him, he selected me. Before I **loved** him, he loved me. Way before. Not because I deserved it or earned it – but only because I needed it. It just **puts you down on your face** before God. And you say “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” You realize that it **all comes from his grace**. It is one of the great riches of Christ.

- **They Overflow The Present:**

Paul spins forward into **the present tense** – and the present moment, and goes on with his list of blessings.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace

Eph 1:7

Redemption was the language of the **slave market** in Paul's day. A price was paid, and a slave could be bought and redeemed. The price of Jesus' death for sins has done just that. He says we are **freed** from slavery to sin – and more than that, he says God has **adopted** you into his family, made you his **own son** or daughter, given you all the rights and privileges of the royal family – simply because of his freely given grace. It is one of the great riches of Christ.

- **They Stretch Out Into The Future:**

And then, Paul looks ahead into the eternal future –

Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Eph 1:13-14

Paul says that the Holy Spirit is a “deposit”, he means that you are in the family, and you have been included in the family inheritance. To make sure you believe this, He gives us his Holy Spirit as a down payment of what is yet to come. What is ahead of us is far, far better even than all the wealth he has already given to us!

“God commands us to be filled with the Spirit; and if we aren't filled, it's because we're living beneath our privileges.”

D. L. Moody

I wonder if you are **living beneath your privileges**.

So Paul looks at the little churches in Ephesus and around the Asia Minor circuit. They worry that they don't have enough, but Paul reminds them that they are **wealthy beyond their wildest dreams**. But he doesn't stop there. God has not only resourced us with spiritual riches, but...

2) **We Are Centered in God's Cosmic Purpose:**

Lots of people today look around today and immediately say a couple of things about the world we live in— they say there is **no meaning or purpose** to the universe. It is all chaotic, the random result of the chance collision of prehistoric atoms and molecules. No creator, no purpose, no destination. And they also say the world we live in is **fractured and divided** – by race and religion, by circumstance and privilege, by sex and politics, by nationality and ideology.

Going no where, and breaking up along the way!

Paul sees that, too, but **he sees deeper**. He says God has let him in on the secret master plan. Listen to how Paul says it...

he made known to us the mystery of his will... to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

Eph 1:9-10

I think these verses are **the greatest single insight** in all the letters of the Apostle Paul. Here is the purpose God is working out in all human history. Behind every

headline, every cultural movement and every season of life, God is working to *bring all things in heaven and on earth together under Christ*. That is what is going on.

That is why Paul thinks the local church is the most important place on earth. It is the place where **lives get changed and people get reconciled and relationships get healed**. That is why what we (what you) are doing here is right at the center of God's cosmic purpose.

Here's the third theme...

3) **We Are Living with Raised Ambitions:**

Years ago **John Stott** had an assistant who took a different call. When the assistant left, he gave Stott a simple gift that he still treasures. It was a letter opener with a phrase from Ephesians 1 on it...

“for the praise of his glory.” Eph 1:6, 12, 14

He adopted it as a life motto, and it remains on his desk still. That is what happens when Christ sweeps you up. Because of the grace that comes from him, you want the glory to go to him. You want to make it the theme of your life. You live with raised ambitions.

Paul was a prisoner. Eventually he would face trial in Rome and be martyred for his faith. He had lost his possessions. He had lost his freedom, humanly speaking. He knew a brutal death was coming.

But **you would never know it**... his vision soared... his sense of purpose was rock solid... his morale – he spoke more often in his letters from prison of joy than in all of the others... his hope... was unquenchable. What was **his secret?**

“It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for.”

Eph 1:11 (The Message)

He was a man who had been **chosen by Christ to be part of his forever kingdom**. To that call, he simply said “yes”. “Yes, yes, yes!”

Prayer...

PRAYERS OF GOD'S PEOPLE FOR EPHESIANS SERMON SERIES *(kneeling)*

Minister: Heavenly Father, we praise you for every spiritual blessing poured out upon us.

People: *For choosing us even before we chose you, for adopting us into your family, and for the gift of your Holy Spirit; we give you heartfelt thanks.*

Minister: We thank you for the rich mercy and grace you have showered upon us

People: *For raising us with Christ from spiritual death, and for enabling us to share in his victory over evil; we give you heartfelt thanks.*

Minister: We stand in wonder at your eternal plan to bring together all things in heaven and earth under your Son Jesus Christ

People: *Make your church the place where people of every race, circumstance, and experience can find new life and healing, together in Christ.*

Minister: We pray that our lives might be lived "for the praise of Christ's glory"

People: *That through us the hope and power of his gospel would spread to our families, workplaces and communities, and even to the ends of the earth.*

Minister: We pray for the special needs and concerns of our church family...
Hear us, Lord;

People: *For your mercy is great.*

Minister: We thank you, Lord, for all the blessings of this life...
We will exalt you, O God our King;

People: *And praise your Name for ever and ever.*