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SESSION ONE

Ephesians 1:1-14

Learner Session Guide



Focus Statement

God has been active in every moment of history, constantly working to draw all things into the harmonious unity of flesh and Spirit revealed in our brother Jesus, the Christ. Ephesians invites us to see, celebrate, and share in this great work of God.



Key Verse

With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. **Ephesians 1:8-10**

Drawn into God

Focus Image



Trinity by Andrei Rublev ca. 1360/70–1427/30 Russian
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Gather

Check-in

Take this time to connect or reconnect with the others in your group.

Pray

All-loving God, draw us so fully into yourself that we, like our brother Jesus, may know that we are eternally beloved, blessed, chosen, and forever belonging to you. May the oneness we share with you and each other be a sacrament of the loving unity into which you are drawing all that is. Amen.

Focus Activity

Remember a table at which you sat and fully enjoyed just being there. What was happening? Who was there? What was the gift of being there? Describe the sense of unity or connection that existed among you and others at the table. How was this time an experience of salvation?

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Open Scripture

Read Ephesians 1:1-14.

- What words and phrases catch your attention? How do they affect you?
- What feelings come through the text?
- What words or phrases are repeated in the reading?

Join the Conversation

Literary Context

1. Ephesians 1:1-14 pounds home our core identity. What element of that identity do you see in the following verses?

1:3-4

1:5-6

1:7-8

1:9-12

1:13-14

2. We are privileged to know the mystery of God's will (1:9). What is that mystery? To what people or what human needs and wounds does this message appeal? What might it tell us about those for whom this book was first written? Compare 1:17-19; 2:1-3; 4:17—5:20; 6:10-20.

3. Look again at all the instances of the phrase “according to” in Ephesians 1:3-14. How does Ephesians picture God? Is this different from ideas and images of God you learned as a child or have heard in our culture or church?

4. The mystery of God’s plan is to draw all things into Christ, in whom God and creation dwell in perfect union (1:8-10). This is not an “oops, I gotta fix this” plan God thought up after human beings sinned. Nor was the plan dormant until the angel Gabriel made a house call on Mary, and she became pregnant with Jesus. The “mystery of his will” is an eternal plan on which God has always been working. In Jesus Christ, God reveals the plan and is bringing it to completion, drawing all things into loving union with the triune God and with each other.

- How does this idea expand your understanding of salvation?
- Where might you see God’s plan becoming concrete in your congregation? What about outside the church, in the daily world of work, play, economics, and politics?
- How do you or your congregation resist God’s plan to unite all things in Christ?

5. Themes of grace and peace are central in Ephesians. Examine references to grace (1:6-7; 2:5, 7-8; 4:7, 29); and to peace (2:14-17; 4:3; 6:15). What differences in meaning and usage do you notice?

Historical Context



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1. According to the salutation of the letter (1:1-2), who is the letter's author and who is the intended audience?

2. Find the city of Ephesus on the map on page 7. Ephesus was an important center of the early Christian mission in Asia Minor. Paul visited the city on his journeys. What did Paul experience in Ephesus, according to Acts 18:18—20:1?

3. The actual authorship of Ephesians has been disputed for more than two hundred years. Many Bible scholars suggest that Paul was not the author, but rather the letter was written after Paul's death by a person appealing to the authority of Paul as a key apostle of the early church. This practice of writing in the name of someone else, such as one's master or teacher, was known as pseudonymity. Expanding upon the thought of a well-known teacher in order to address new generations was a common and well-respected practice in the ancient Near East. Several New Testament books are thought to be written in the names of key apostles of the early church, including Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, 1 and 2 Peter, and James.

Scholars point to certain clues in the Greek text of Ephesians to suggest pseudonymity. For example:

- ◆ Many Greek words and a number of theological viewpoints in Ephesians don't appear in Paul's other undisputed letters.
- ◆ Some sentences in Ephesians are unusually long. Ephesians 1:3-14 and 3:1-6 are each one long sentence in Greek.
- ◆ It is also uncertain whether Ephesians was intended only for the church in Ephesus. Our earliest Greek manuscript of this letter does not include the phrase "in Ephesus" (see the footnote for Ephesians 1:2).
- ◆ Paul's letters tend to address very specific issues, while Ephesians appears to be a general teaching tract for several churches in Asia Minor, perhaps written between 80 and 100 C.E. It may have become associated with the Ephesians because of the importance of that church in Asia Minor.
- What do you think of the idea that someone other than Paul himself may have written Ephesians? Does it undermine your trust in the message of Ephesians? Why or why not?
- Proving authorship with complete certainty is difficult. How would you go about trying to determine whether Ephesians was written by Paul or by one of his followers? In the end, what do you think matters most—who wrote Ephesians or what the message of Ephesians is? Why?

4. “In Christ [Jesus]” (1:3) suggests incorporation into Christ (compare Colossians 1:2). Wherever believers are, they are “in Christ,” sharing the spiritual benefits of all that Christ is and has in the heavenly places (1:3). Our earthly existence is already joined with the invisible, heavenly world.

- Where and how do you think believers in the early church “tasted” these spiritual benefits? Where do we experience being “in Christ” today? What role do Christian community and communal worship play?

Lutheran Context

1. “Grace alone” (*sola gratia*, SOH-la GRAH-tsee-ah in Latin) was a central cry of faith and praise to God for Martin Luther and it continues to be so for the Lutheran understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ephesians makes God’s grace clear: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (2:8-9).

- Slowly read Ephesians 1:3-14, noting the actor in each phrase. List all of the things God does. Who is the mover and shaker in the drama of salvation?
- How is grace described in Ephesians 1:3-14? What is the proper human response? What experience of grace moves this response in you?

2. Martin Luther said, “[Y]ou are so cemented to Christ that He and you are one person, which cannot be separated but remain attached to Him forever . . . more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife” (Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification* [Fortress Press, 2005] 41). In this “happy exchange,” all that is in Christ is mine and what is mine is taken into Christ.

- Compare Luther’s words about being united with Christ with the Ephesians description of God gathering up all things in Christ. Where and when do you experience this intimate union with Christ?
- What does the “happy exchange” mean about how we see ourselves—our guilt, shame, fears, struggles, and joys?



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Devotional Context

1. God is creating a universe in which you and all the whirling elements of the universe are drawn into the harmony that is the inner life of the Holy Trinity, where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwell in perfect unity. Andrei Rublev captures an image of this loving unity in the Russian Orthodox icon of the Holy Trinity (1409). A constant current of love flows among the persons of the Trinity.
 - View Rublev's icon, the Focus Image on p. 5. Imagine the love flowing in the inner life of the Trinity. The figures welcome you to pull up a chair and sit at the fourth (the empty) side of the table. This is your place, sharing the life and love flowing through the heart of the blessed Trinity.
 - What do you receive as you are joined in God's triune life? What is it that you want to give or release into the flow of this love and life?
2. In John 12:32 Jesus echoes the description in Ephesians of the mystery of God's will: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people [or all things] to myself."
 - Imagine Jesus lifted up on the cross or ascending into heaven. See all things being drawn into him. Who do you see moving toward or being incorporated into him? What thoughts, feelings, hopes, and desires does this image awake in you? Who do you want to see being drawn in and made whole?
 - Share an experience of feeling "drawn into Jesus" in which you felt utterly loved or completely one with him.

Wrap-up

Be ready to look back over the work the group has done during the session.

Pray

Lord Jesus Christ, turn our hearts from those things that separate us and cause division. Turn our eyes to see and celebrate all that joins us together, that we may surrender to the gravity of your grace as you draw us together and make us one in you. Amen.

Extending the Conversation

Homework

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Ephesians 2: 1-22.

2. Pay attention to experiences of unity with God, self, others, and creation. Some may experience oneness with all things in nature. Experiences of unity might come as you work or play with others. In a journal, describe these experiences and how they affect your spirit and energy.

3. Do this same exercise paying attention to experiences of separation, tension, and division. How do these experiences affect you? Pray for help to know how you can live out the mystery of God's will amid a world of tension and division.

4. Practice a mysticism of everyday life. Pay attention to stories you read in the newspaper or receive through radio and television. Where do you notice God drawing things and people together in loving unity? Give thanks to God for these. Where do forces thwart God's plan? Be ready to share what you notice with the group.

Enrichment

1. Read the introductory article "The Letters of Paul," pages 1849-50 in *Lutheran Study Bible* (Augsburg Fortress, 2009). Or, read an article on pseudonymity or Deutero-Pauline writings in a recent Bible dictionary or in a reliable one-volume Bible commentary.

2. Meditate on short sections of Ephesians 2. Find a comfortable chair and a place where you can be alone. Quiet yourself, reminding yourself that you are in God's presence; then read and listen to God speaking to and in you.

Day 1: Ephesians 2:1-5

Day 2: Ephesians 2:6-10

Day 3: Ephesians 2:11-13

Day 4: Ephesians 2:14-18

Day 5: Ephesians 2:19-22

Days 6 & 7: Return to the passages that spoke most deeply to you or troubled you the most.

3. Read the introduction and notes for Ephesians in *Lutheran Study Bible* or another study Bible. Use this resource to examine verses that most interest or confuse you. Share what you find with others in the group. Interpretations from various commentators will differ, which makes exploration more interesting.



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4. Listen to music that draws you into it so that you feel oneness with yourself, others, and God. Music from diverse styles and eras can become an experience of and prayer for the completion of God's plan to make all things one.

For Further Reading

Available from www.augsburgfortress.org/store:

Lutheran Study Bible (Augsburg Fortress, 2009).

Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon by Tom Wright (Westminster/John Knox, 2004). Wright offers a fresh, contemporary translation with an engaging, readable exposition of the scripture text.