

Who is God?

Ephesians 1:1-14

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



The trip went just about how every long trip tends to go. There were moments when things went perfectly well, and then there were moments when he thought he'd never make it. But here he is, finally arriving at his long-awaited destination. He doesn't know it yet, but this stop isn't just going to be another stop in a long journey. No, he is going to make lasting connections here. He'll spend years here, in fact. He'll even have a close call where he thought he'd never make it out alive. None of that is on his mind at this moment. Why? Because it hasn't happened yet. Here he is today, arriving and ready to be done traveling for a while.

As his ship pulls into the harbor, the city comes into view. The long marble road that cuts through the center of town and leads to the most interesting and important places is right in front of him, and he smiles as he thinks about what being in such a big city will be like. On this trip, he's mostly been traveling from town to town and only stopping at a few cities. And none as large as this one. The harbor is bustling with dock workers and sailors all loading or unloading their ships. This harbor is one of many in the region, but there is none more important. All trade comes through here. Flowing inland or out to sea, it comes through this place. That means not only that goods come and go, but so do ideas, stories, and people. There is no shortage of ideas in a place like this, and that excites him all the more. He wonders about who he will run into in this city. Who will be a person of peace, and who will give him a hard time? The truth is, he is coming here with his own ideas to share. These are ideas that will catch the hearts of many and will begin to turn this place upside down. He doesn't know how it will all happen here, but it is what has happened all along the way so far. His message is one of hope and life, but it challenges the way that many people see themselves. That can be a tough pill to swallow, but it is what will set them free.

Fast-forwarding ten-plus years from this moment when Paul arrives in Ephesus, he'll write a letter to the believers in that region, and he'll remind them of the importance of that life-altering news he shared with them so many years before. How will he start his letter? By reminding them of who they are in Christ. Why? **Because Paul knows that a right view of self begins with a right view of God.**

1. Setting, Occasion, & Purpose

a. The city of Ephesus – A crown jewel in Asia Minor

- i. **The Ephesian church is, both geographically and culturally speaking, far away from the settings of the Gospels.** The churches in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) were deeply entrenched in Roman politics, religious worship, and cultural dynamics that were vastly different from their brothers and sisters in the churches around Jerusalem. Ephesus was a harbor city with cultural ideas coming and going with every ship and sailor that came and went. **Ephesus was the most important of the seven cities. Though Pergamum was apparently the official capital of the province of Asia, Ephesus was its greatest city (population 250,000+).** It was a large town and a seat of proconsular government (Acts 19:38). When a proconsul took up his appointment, he had to enter his province at Ephesus.¹ This prominence and flow of trade contributed to its complexity.
- ii. Beginning in the reign of Caesar Augustus and lasting for 200 years, Ephesus experienced a more stable political history which enabled the city to prosper and thrive.²
- iii. **Ephesus may accurately be called the leading city of the richest region of the Roman Empire. Politically, the city functioned as the Roman provincial capital of Asia Minor (from 133 B.C.). Economically, Strabo called Ephesus “the greatest commercial center in Asia this side of the Taurus river.”**³

iv. Paul’s experience in Ephesus – Acts 19

1. When Paul entered Ephesus, he would have entered through the Magnesian Gate, the major opening in the fortification walls on the southeast side of the city. The road through here connected Ephesus with Magnesia on the Meander about fifteen miles (24 km) to the east and thence to an ancient road that led all the way into Babylonia. A short walk would have brought him into the civic forum, the center of the city’s government. Here he would have seen a largely open courtyard of about 525 by 190 feet (160 × 58 m) surrounded by columned porches, the most magnificent of which would have been the Basilica Stoa, constructed around 11 BC by Sextus Pollio. This two-story, three-aisled portico was 50 feet (15.25 m) wide, stretching the entire length of the civic forum on its north side. Its covered area, supported by sixty-seven Ionic columns, would have been a popular place for businessmen and city politicians to meet and conduct business out of the sun or rain. The Stoa was dedicated “to Artemis of the Ephesians, Emperor Caesar Augustus, son of a god, Tiberius Caesar, son of Augustus, and to the Ephesian people” with larger-than-life statues of Augustus and his wife, Livia in an antechamber on its easternmost side⁴

v. The Harbor – A center of trade and commerce.

¹ Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 63.

² Clinton E. Arnold, “Ephesus,” ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 249.

³ Clinton E. Arnold, “Ephesus,” ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 249.

⁴ David A. deSilva, “The Social and Geographical World of Ephesus (Acts 18:19–21, 24; 19:1–41; 20:16–17; Ephesians 1:1; 1 Timothy 1:3; Revelation 1:11; 2:1),” in *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation*, ed. Barry J. Beitzel, Jessica Parks, and Doug Mangum, Lexham Geographic Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 540.

1. The Ephesian harbor indeed afforded a distinctive view into the Roman imperial economy that directed a disproportionate percentage of the world's goods—both luxury items and staples—toward “the great city” (Rev 17:18; see esp. also 18:11–20).⁵
 - a. The emperor Claudius provided insurance for ships dedicated to delivering grain to Rome, should they be lost at sea, a major incentive in a risky industry.⁶
 - b. This center of trade and commerce made the city quite the place for the exchange of ideas and religious expressions. Ephesus would come to be known for its expansive library built around 110 AD.
 - c. **The economic reality provided by the harbor was a city that was very wealthy on the whole.**
 2. **The harbor and all of its trade also represent a very different political reality than that of the setting of the gospels.**
 - a. In Asia Minor, Roman loyalty is not only expected it is simply assumed. That is a strong contrast to the setting of the gospels in Jerusalem and Galilee. In Jerusalem, allegiance to the Roman Empire is an afterthought. Jerusalem was the seat of worship for the Jews, and they understood that Rome was in charge, but zeal or passion for Rome was not a thing. Keeping the peace with Rome and focus on worshipping God was the main perspective. Galilee, however, was a seat of constant rebellions and insurrections against Rome. If Jerusalem was neutral on Rome and Asia Minor was very pro-Roman, Galilee was a hotbed of resistance and anti-Roman thought.
 - b. **Believers living in the region of Asia Minor faced a very real challenge, politically speaking when they came to faith in Christ. Their identity was changed and with it their political identity.**
- vi. **Religious Expression** – Don't threaten Rome and anything goes.
1. When it comes to religious expression, Ephesus and Ephesians are deeply religious. And as long as their religious expressions didn't threaten Rome, they were permitted and encouraged to engage with it. This led to a very syncretistic and blended tableau of religious expression.
- vii. **Pictures of Ephesus in the NT.**
1. We are given several touchpoints with the churches in Ephesus through the NT. This helps us to get a handle on the lives and experiences of believers in this region over a larger swath of time.
 - a. **AD 52 - Paul's first encounter**
 - i. We can read about Paul's main encounter in Acts 19. – Paul comes to Ephesus from Antioch on his second missionary journey. We read about disciples already being present in the city and Paul staying for two years to instruct them (19:10). Then, Paul needs to leave due to a riot involving a silversmith named Demetrius.

⁵ David A. deSilva, “The Social and Geographical World of Ephesus (Acts 18:19–21, 24; 19:1–41; 20:16–17; Ephesians 1:1; 1 Timothy 1:3; Revelation 1:11; 2:1),” in *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation*, ed. Barry J. Beitzel, Jessica Parks, and Doug Mangum, Lexham Geographic Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 545.

⁶ David A. deSilva, “The Social and Geographical World of Ephesus (Acts 18:19–21, 24; 19:1–41; 20:16–17; Ephesians 1:1; 1 Timothy 1:3; Revelation 1:11; 2:1),” in *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation*, ed. Barry J. Beitzel, Jessica Parks, and Doug Mangum, Lexham Geographic Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 545.

b. AD 60 - Paul's letter

- i. Some 10 years later, Paul while under house arrest in Rome, writes to the Ephesian church(es) to encourage them in their faith and love for God.

c. AD 90 - John's Letter (Revelation)

- i. Jesus admonished seven churches in the region including Ephesus through the Apostle John in his letter called, Revelation. In chapter 2, Jesus gives a direct exhortation to the church in Ephesus who while being faithful to hold to sound doctrine lost their love for their neighbors and had stopped sharing the gospel (Rev. 2:4)
- ii. They would respond positively and faithfully to Jesus' words and continue to be an influence for the gospel in the region.

2. What we see from these accounts is that, they had a leading role in the Christian church throughout the Gentile world.

- a. **IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH – "I BECAME acquainted through God with your much beloved name, which you have obtained by your righteous nature, according to faith and love in Christ Jesus our Savior.** You are imitators of God, and, having kindled your brotherly task by the blood of God, you completed it perfectly. ² For when you heard that I had been sent a prisoner from Syria for the sake of our common name and hope, **in the hope of obtaining by your prayers the privilege of fighting with beasts at Rome,** that by so doing I might be enabled to be a true disciple, you hastened to see me."⁷
 - i. **This comment is likely written some 18 years after John writes Revelation.**

viii. So, what is Paul's purpose in writing to these believers?

- 1. To strengthen believers by reminding them of what they have been saved from and saved for.
 - a. They are saved from sin and made into a new person and are part of a new family.
 - b. They are saved for lives of glorifying God and serving each other in love.
- 2. How does Paul begin advancing this idea? → By reminding them of who God is.

2. God

a. Who God is matters in the scope of our everyday lives.

- i. If the believers in Ephesus were going to remain faithful, it wasn't because they were strong enough on their own to solve their problems or to stand against the cultural values. It was because God himself had changed them and was strengthening them.
- ii. **If the message of Paul to the Ephesians was relevant then, it is just as relevant today.**
→ why?
 - 1. They lived in a context where being a Christian was not a social advantage. → We are living in a context where it is less and less advantageous to be a Christian.

⁷ Pope Clement I et al., *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 1, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1912–1913), 173–175.

2. They lived in a politically charged world where allegiance to Rome trumped everything else. → We are living in a cultural moment where political rhetoric or at least perceived political rhetoric can derail relationships and erode trust.
3. They were real people who were struggling through faithfulness just as we are real people struggling through faithfulness.

b. Religious worship in Ephesus

- i. Sometimes when we read the Bible, we can read it from a disconnected perspective. That is, we can read it only thinking through our current cultural conditions, values, expectations, and perspectives. However, while the Bible is written for us, it was not written to us. Here's what I mean, our lives are to be informed by the truth of the Scriptures, and its truth is just as true today as when it was written. But, we are not the original audience of the Bible. In fact the Bible has multiple original audiences.
 1. **Key:** The Bible cannot mean something to us today that it did not mean to the original audience.
 2. When we begin to understand the importance of what Paul is reminding the Ephesian believers of when it come to God in 1:1-14, we have to understand it in their context of religious worship.
- ii. **Emperor Worship** – This is a key aspect to the world that Paul is writing into. Paying taxes and observing the laws of the Roman Empire were not simply observing rules and giving the government its due. They were actions that were connected to the perceived “divinity” of the ruling emperor. This is a far cry from the world that we live in currently in America.
 1. Roman coins were inscribed with “PON MAX”, which stands for “Pontifex Maximus” or “Greatest Priest”. The title denoted the position of emperor as the head of the state religion. One hundred years earlier in 29 BC, a delegation from Asia Minor had asked permission to set up a cult to worship Caesar. **Although Augustus, the Caesar at the time, refused, he did allowed a cult devoted to the god of Roma (which included a temple with his statue).** It was the start of an imperial cult that grew over time. **When Augustus died, the Roman Senate voted to deify him, and so his son, Tiberius (emperor during the ministry of Jesus) was called “the son of God”.** The Emperors also began to be known as “the savior of the world”, “the lord” and “benefactor” (Mark 10:42). A generation later the Emperor Caligula (37 AD) proclaimed the “good news” that he had been deified and, because he was so feared, no one objected.⁸
- iii. **“Great is Artemis”** – The setting → Ephesus (Cf. Acts 19:21ff)
 1. Artemis was indeed great. She (**Artemis is her Greek name; her Roman name is Diana**) was the most powerful divinity in the place, and had been for a long time. In the distant past a meteorite had smashed into the surface of the earth somewhere near Ephesus, and the local people had regarded it as a gift from **heaven**, a statue (though presumably not very lifelike) of the goddess herself.⁹
 2. Artemis, Ephesus's major goddess, was known as a goddess of fertility and as “mistress of the wild beasts,” a daughter of Zeus and Leto, and a sister of Apollo.
 - a. **In this cult she was a virgin who helped women in childbirth, a huntress with bow and arrow, and the goddess of death.**¹⁰

⁸ Chester, Tim. Revelation For You: Seeing history from heaven's perspective (p. 7). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

⁹ Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 121.

¹⁰ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 607.

- b. Statues depict her as wearing a zodiac necklace, **showing her authority over the stars and events**. A weeklong festival to her, known as Artemision, took place each spring. Her shrine in Ephesus was a major site, **one of the seven wonders of the ancient world**.¹¹
 - c. She was worshiped in many locales, since we know of thirty-three shrines to her, but the major site for her worship in Asia Minor was at Ephesus. **Here the temple to her was four times the size of the Parthenon. It had pillars 60 feet high and was about 425 feet by 225 feet, much larger than a football field** (Larkin 1995: 282).¹²
 - i. When you think of this temple, this of Jack Trice Stadium. That is the comparable equivalent in our context.
- c. “According to his purpose” (Eph. 1:9) → God was doing something different, intentionally.
 - i. **The gospel represented an entirely new reality that was wildly distinctive from the cultural values of Ephesus.**
 - 1. **Proclaiming, “Jesus is Lord” was not a neutral declaration, it was an act of outright defiance against Rome. → The gospel was not neutral in the life of the Ephesian church.**
 - ii. **What Paul will unpack in this letter is the reality that God is in fact establishing and creating not just a merry band of moral people who are just another part of the religious tapestry of the first century. Instead, God is creating for himself a community of redeemed people who when they live out the distinctiveness of their redemption, it is actually for the good of the whole society.**
 - 1. God’s awesome plan is “to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (v 10). His plan is to bring together (literally, to “sum up”) everything under Christ, including rebellious evil spirits in the heavenly realms and rebellious human beings on the earth.¹³
 - iii. **Rule over the powers of evil by doing good** – Believers are to be about the common good of their neighbors. (cf. 1 Pet. 2:12) → This is a historic position of the church in times of great social pressure and turmoil is to treat others uncommonly well.
 - 1. In the middle through late Roman empire Christians were known to rescue infants who had been abandoned to die.
 - 2. **“But, perhaps above all else, Christianity brought a new conception of humanity to a world saturated with capricious cruelty and the vicarious love of death. ... Finally, what Christianity gave to its converts was nothing less than their humanity.”¹⁴**
- d. **KEY: It all starts with God.**
 - i. Don’t miss the key figure: God.
 - 1. What has God done? → God blessed them, chose them, predestined them, adopted them, redeemed them, revealed himself to them, gave them an inheritance, and sealed them with the promised Holy Spirit.
 - 2. God is to be praised, because he has bestowed on his people “in Christ” every spiritual blessing. Spiritual blessings are to be distinguished, probably, from material blessings, which are also bestowed by God—such blessings as are

¹¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 608.

¹² Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 607.

¹³ Richard Coekin, *Ephesians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2015), 22.

¹⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, (Harper Collins, 1997), 214-215.

promised in Deut. 28:1–14, for example, to those who obey his commandments. The nature of the spiritual blessings here referred to is not in doubt: they are detailed in the following words of the *berakhah*. They include election to holiness, in a statement as God’s sons and daughters, redemption and forgiveness, the gift of the Spirit, and the hope of glory.¹⁵

3. **As the fulfillment is experienced “in Christ,” so it is in him that the purpose is conceived. If, as Col. 1:16 affirms, it was “in him” that all things were created, so, we are here assured, earlier still it was “in him” that the people of God were chosen.** He is the Chosen One of God *par excellence*; it is by union with him, according to the divine purpose realized in time, that others are chosen. Less than justice is done to the present language when it is debated whether Christ is the foundation or origin, or merely the executor of election. He is foundation, origin, and executor: all that is involved in election and its fruits depends on him.¹⁶

ii. The purpose of God redeeming us (spiritually now, and one day bodily with all creation, Romans 8:21–23) is the “summing up” of all things under Christ. **The focus of the plan is not us, but Christ. The goal was not just redeeming us but also uniting us under the rule of Christ.** The best thing about this plan is not the unity, but the unity under Christ. There have been many Caesars, emperors, popes, führers and corporate CEOs who planned to unite the world under their global domination. Thankfully, all have failed, for their rule was tyrannical and foolish. By contrast, since Christ is compassionate and wise, to be united under his rule will bring us contented happiness in the splendid heavenly garden-city-church governed by him.¹⁷

e. Them & Us... In Christ.

i. Paul’s opening poem focuses on God as the main character. He has done all of the work, but it is also clear that there is one party who is the recipient of God’s work, humanity.

ii. **v.4 then paints the reality that the redeeming work God has accomplished through Christ, it to take full effect in the lives of the redeemed. → “Holy & Blameless”**

1. There is a dominant ethical quality about the divine election, as is inevitable in view of the character of the electing God. In 1 Peter 1:15–16, where the wording of our present text is echoed, this lesson is pointed with a quotation from the OT law of holiness: “as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’ ” **No other way of life is fitting for those who are “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ”** (1 Peter. 1:2). So here, the purpose of God’s choosing his people in Christ is that they should be “holy and blameless” in his presence, both here and now in earthly life and ultimately when they appear before him.¹⁸

iii. **What will this look like in the letter?**

1. People of peace through turmoil.

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 253.

¹⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 254–255.

¹⁷ Richard Coekin, *Ephesians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2015), 22.

¹⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 255.

- a. Peace is not merely an absence of conflict but a state of wholeness. If they are truly all that has been described, then they are in need of nothing else.
 - b. What are we looking to make us more than what God can make of us?
- 2. People of hope through fear.**
- a. If God is in control in the way that Paul outlines, then what do we have to fear? Yes, there are things to not look forward to and prefer to avoid. But what do we have to actually fear?
- 3. People of joy through hardship.**
- a. We know that the Ephesian church experienced hardship, it is why they would need a corrective letter from Jesus (Rev. 2). We will experience hardship on this side of heaven. But joy is a contentment that surpasses my circumstances and is rooted in my identity.