

Anchored in God's Loving Purposes Ephesians 1.1-2

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Two thousand years ago, Archimedes famously said, "Give me a lever and a place to stand, and I will move the world."

You need a lever when something is stuck, when it is the wrong way round, when it sits in a place where it shouldn't be, when it is in the way of, or in the place of, something else.

We live in "interesting" times. We all have a sense that things – things in our lives, things in the lives of those we know and love, things in this country and this world – are not the way they're supposed to be.

Things feel stuck, and upside down, and out of place. We feel stuck and upside down and out of place.

This morning, we begin a nine-month long exploration of a 2000-year-old lever that has the power to put things right. For two thousand years it has been used to get things that are stuck unstuck, and to turn things that are upside down right side up, and to take things that are in the wrong places and put them back in the right places.

But the lever we are exploring is not a crowbar made not of wood, or a lever made of steel, it's a small roll of fragile parchment, and on it are a little more than 2000 Greek words scribbled with a reed and charcoal ink.



It is letter from a man named Paul to a church in a place called Ephesus. And yet, somehow, at the same time, it is a letter from the God of the universe to the group of people all around the world and all through the ages known as the Church of Jesus Christ, including this church, Covenant Church, in West Lafayette, Indiana, in 2026.

And ever since it was written, it has been a lever that God has used to pry things up and roll things over and put things back in their right place.

I've spent all summer swimming around in these amazing waters, and I can't wait to watch how God by his Spirit uses these inspired words to inspire us to a new and ever more faithful life, one that reflects him and serves his purposes more fully, and one that anchors us more deeply than ever into the holy and loving purposes of God.

For the next nine months we'll be walking through these amazing and unsettling words, exploring them and taking them to heart. I ...

- Hope you'll be here every Sunday, or you'll listen to the sermon if you can't be. We don't want you to miss a single message

- Hope you'll read Ephesians through or listen to it in its entirety at least once a month. Ideally, we encourage you to do that in a different translation each time. The English-speaking church is blessed with lots of great translations.

You might start with the NIV, which is the translation we use in our teaching, Then consider some of the other proven translations like the New Living Translation, the one I use for my daily bible reading, which is exceptional, and the English Standard version.

There are two great interpretive translations by pastors: JB Phillips's version and Eugene Peterson's *The Message*.

You might pick one of the easy reading versions. I like the CEV – the Contemporary English Version – and the ERV – the Easy-to-Read Bible,

And if you've studied another language, you might consider reading it in that

You'll hear different nuances every time you read it in a different version

- I hope sometime in the next few weeks you'll take the time to copy out the whole book by hand. That also has an amazing way of slowing you down and helping you see things you otherwise would miss.
- And last, we hope you'll commit some favorite passages to memory along the way
To begin with, you might consider brushing off Ephesians 3.14-21, which we all memorized six years ago, and then add some others

The more you invest in this series, the more you'll benefit from it.

One other detail about the series. Some of you will remember that this past spring we were going to address some of the troublesome issues in our world that are causing so much weariness for some of us: politics, how we relate to outsiders, social media, AI, and the disconcerting divisions among evangelicals. Then someone broke his collar bone.

But we've structured the series this fall in such a way that we'll be able to come back and address each one of those. And as each current issue comes, we'll have a Sunday morning message followed by a Wednesday evening discussion. Should be fun! Keep your eye on our eNews and our website for more information.

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Okay, this morning we are going to take a look at how the letter to the Ephesians starts, and then we'll spend the rest of our time looking at clues about why the letter was written and what makes it so powerful.

Ephesians 1.1-2

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The very first line tells us who the letter is from.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

Now this is a really odd way to begin.

Not because the first line tells us who the letter is from. That was common in ancient letters because they were written on scrolls. Otherwise you wouldn't know who it was from until you had unrolled the whole scroll and gotten to the very end.

The reason it is odd is because Paul doesn't really tell us anything about himself. To tell us who he is, he just tells us who he serves and why. He thinks it is sufficient to tell us *whose* he is.

That's significant because if there was a Who's Who of the Ancient World, Paul would likely have been on it. He was a brilliant and highly educated man, who studied under one of the most respected Jewish scholars there ever was, and he was certainly considered one of the most promising young leaders in Jerusalem, the religious capital of the Jewish world.

But he doesn't say any of that. In fact, he really doesn't say anything about himself at all – except this. Having left all that, he now serves as a representative and an envoy of someone named Jesus.

An *apostle* was an official representative of a high ranking official. Literally it means "a sent one." It refers to someone sent in the place of someone else to represent them.

And Paul refers to the one he serves as *Christ Jesus*. You may already know that "Christ" is not a name. It's a title. "Christ" is the Greek form and "Messiah" is the Hebrew word. Both words mean "the Anointed One."

But what you may not know is that, in the ancient world, when you wanted to establish a new king, you didn't crown him, you anointed him. So in just the same way if we said "the crowned one," Christ, the anointed one, means, "the King." It was a term that was used throughout the Old Testament to describe the promised King who was coming to fulfill God's redemptive purposes. And now he has come. That King is Jesus of Nazareth. And Paul has given his life to serve him.

So the only thing Paul considers important for us to know about himself is not his societal status or his position of power or his elite education. It is simply that he follows and represents Jesus the King. He is *his*. Turns out Paul *did* tell us the most important thing about himself.

What's the single most important thing you could tell someone about who you are?

It's fitting, this being our fall kickoff Sunday, that I pause here for just a moment to remind you about how we understand our mission and vision here at Covenant.

We actually don't use mission and vision language here. Instead, we explain whose we are and what we're about in much the same way Paul does here.

We begin with our confession of faith, the same one the early church used. Jesus is Lord, the Christ, the King. That's why we use the crown as our logo.

That leads to our statement of identity: we are *his*. His people, his subjects.

And from that flows our statement of purpose. As his people, we exist for his sake – for his *kingdom* – for the sake of the new realm that establishing in the hearts of those who come to know him – and for his *glory* – for the sake of his reputation in this world.

From that, God's kingdom calling on our lives flows. Our king who loves this world calls us to follow him into it, and to live a life of love in the same sort of way that he did.

Earlier this week I took about ten minutes to explain in a bit more detail how our confession of faith, our identity, our purpose, and our calling all fit together and find expression in practical everyday ways. You can find that video on our blog, on our Instagram account, or on our Facebook account. I'd encourage you to give it a watch or a listen sometime this week. And then, to learn more, and to take a next toward being part of the Covenant family, to hop into our next Thrive class in two weeks.

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Next Paul, the representative of King Jesus, tells us who he is writing to.

The second phrase in verse 1 says:

To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

Ephesus



Ephesus was located right along the western shoreline of what we know today as Türkiye.

It was one of the five largest cities in the entire Roman empire, with a quarter of a million residents at the time when Paul lived and served there, and its magnificent Temple of Diana was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Specifically, Paul says he is writing to *God's holy people* in Ephesus. Nine times in the Book of Ephesians Paul refers to the Christian believers as "the holy ones."

We can get a bit vague on what holiness means. The biblical idea of holiness is first the idea of *distinctiveness*. Holy literally means "set apart." If we are holy, we don't blend in to the surrounding world. We are *different*.

Holy means being distinctive in the way that God is distinctive. As God's children we will have a family resemblance to our father. People will look at us and see something of him.

Do people in this world look at you and catch a glimpse of him?

Then Paul uses another phrase to describe them: they are the faithful in Christ Jesus.

Faith is a very relational word in the New Testament. It doesn't just mean you believe certain doctrinal things to be true about Jesus. It means you've put your trust, your confidence, in him as a person. You have entrusted your life to him.

Faith is also a word that expresses our deepest allegiance. When we say we have faith in Jesus, we are saying we have given him our allegiance as King. That's what Paul saw in the church in Ephesus: he could draw a straight line from their allegiance to Jesus as King and the sort of lives they lived.

If someone were writing a letter to you, or to us together, and they were highlighting the faith qualities they saw in us, what words might they choose? What would you *want* them to see in your life and in ours together?

* * *

Paul concludes his opening greeting by blessing them. A blessing, as you probably know, is a prayer that is directed to God but spoken directly to a person:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It sounds a bit like something you'd read in the "inspirational" section of your local Hallmark store, if there still is such a thing.

But these words actually explode with significance. That's why I love using this phrase in my greetings or partings or texts or phone calls or emails.

When you say to someone, "God's grace to you," you are praying, "May God lavish upon you his undeserved and inexhaustible love in a way that leaves you a changed person."

And when you say, "God's peace to you," you are praying that God would fulfill his holy and loving purposes in their lives, putting right in their hearts all that has gone wrong, and usher them into his best for them.

So that's how the letter begins. But Paul doesn't come right to the point and say why he wrote it.

Sometimes a writer in Scripture comes right out and tells us why he wrote the book or letter we're holding in our hands, like Luke does in the introduction of his gospel and again at the beginning of Acts. But we don't always have that clear signpost.

There are two things I look for whenever I pick up a book of the Bible to try to put my finger out why God gave us that book and how he intends us to benefit from it.

One is the **structure** of the book – the main building blocks or chunks of the book, how they are related to each other, and how the author moves from one to the next.

The other is the **key words and themes** that keep resurfacing. They have a way of pointing to the things that are most on the author's heart.

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So here's what you find when we explore those two things. First, about **the structure**.

When you first block out the letter, you can see that there are eight or ten different sections in the Book of Ephesians, but it won't take many readings of this book to realize that its irreducible structure comes down to two main parts.

Conveniently for us – it doesn't always work this way – the first three chapters are part one, and then last three are part two.

Ephesians 1.1-2, as we saw, sets up the first part.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then Ephesians 4.1 sets up the second part.

As a prisoner for the Lord, *then*, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

You can see the clear parallel with 1.1-2. And the word *then* is a clear marker of a new development in Paul's thought. In most versions it is translated with the stronger and more obvious connective word "therefore."

Paul is saying: because of that, because of everything I just shared, because that is true – given that we belong to Jesus, given that he has brought us from death to life, and folded us into his family, given that we have given our lives over to him – this is the obvious implication: *we should live lives that reflect that reality*. If you believe this way, then walk this way. Unfortunately a lot of evangelicals today seem to live as though the Book of Ephesians only had the first three chapters.

Just noticing this two-part structure takes us a long way to understanding Paul's purpose in writing the letter.

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The other great way to get at the purpose of a letter or book in the Bible is to notice the **key words and themes** that keep resurfacing. They point to the things that are most on the author's heart.

The first time you read through Ephesians at one sitting I'd encourage you notice the structure, and also to circle words that you notice start showing up with some frequency, and see what you see.

When I did that, there were a couple of dozen important words that I saw resurfacing, but there were six that really stood out and spell out Paul's intent in writing the letter.

Plan

The first repeated word, or thematic family, is the word *plan*, and related words like *purpose*, *will*, *pleasure*, *choice*, and *predestination*. (1.1, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 20-23, plus 2.15.)

The word *mystery* also fits with this word group, because Paul uses the word not like Agatha Christie does at the beginning of her stories, when something inexplicable has happened and everyone is clueless about who done it, but the way she uses the word at the end of the book when she gathers all of the characters in the room and has Hercule Poirot explain clearly to everyone how all the pieces fit together. For Paul, a mystery is something *explained*.

Here's an example of the ten or so places where this theme of God's plans and purposes surfaces:

Ephesians 1.11

In him we were also *chosen*, having been *predestined* according to the *plan* of him who works out everything in conformity with the *purpose* of his *will*.

Paul is saying: when you look at the unexpected circumstances of life and the unpredictable course of history, it isn't always easy to see a divine thread. But what if you

were to ask God what he is up to in human history? What would he say? Well, here is his answer.

That brings us to the second word cluster that runs through the book.

One

Paul repeats the word *one* eight times, seven of them in just a few sentences at the start of chapter four.

Ephesians 4.4-6

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Related to that is the Greek word that can be translated *all* or *every*, which is repeated another fifteen times or so, to refer to this unifying work.

The words *reconcile* and *bring near* also fit into this thematic group.

Some of you noticed when you read through Ephesians this week that there is also an unusual number of striking word pairs in Ephesians – dead and alive, far and near, two becoming one, many members but one body, darkness and light, old self and new self – that emphasize this theme of unity and oneness.

Clearly the purposes of God involve taking what is divided – us from him, us from each other – and uniting us.

The next key word is the most important of them all. It reveals who stands at the middle of God's redemptive work in human history, the One on whom all this unifying work centers.

Christ the King

In this short letter, only six chapters long, Paul mentions Jesus 16 times.

Even more tellingly, he refers to Jesus using the title *Lord*, which could also be translated Master, 17 times.

And he mentions the title *Christ*, the King, 49 times.

So 66 times, he not only mentions Jesus, but refers to him using a title that reiterates his absolute kingly power and masterly authority over each of us and all of us as human beings.

Listen to the way these first three themes – 1) God carrying out his perfect plan 2) in such a way that all things are brought together into unity 3) under the Kingship and Lordship of Jesus – listen to the way those themes come through in these two pivotal passages from chapter 1.

Ephesians 1.9-10

God made known to us the *mystery* of his *will* according to his good *pleasure*, which he *purposed* in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring *unity* to *all* things in heaven and on earth under *Christ*.

Ephesians 1.20-23

He raised *Christ* from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above *all rule and authority*, power and dominion, and *every* name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed *all things* under his feet and appointed him to be *head* over *everything* for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

In the ancient Near East, placing things under someone's feet was the same thing as saying that person is the King and has absolute authority over them.

And God placed *all things* under his feet and appointed him to be *head* over *everything* for the church.

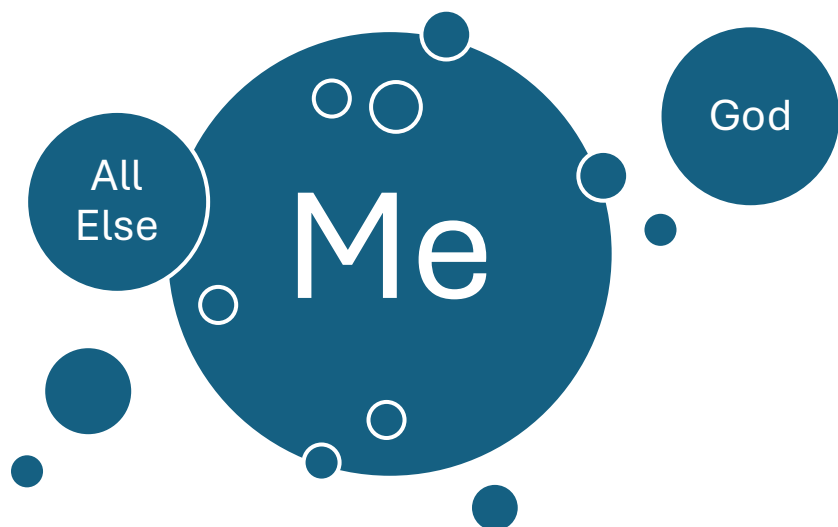
Let me just pause here.

For most of us, when we think about the gospel, and about God's redemptive work in history, how do we frame that in?

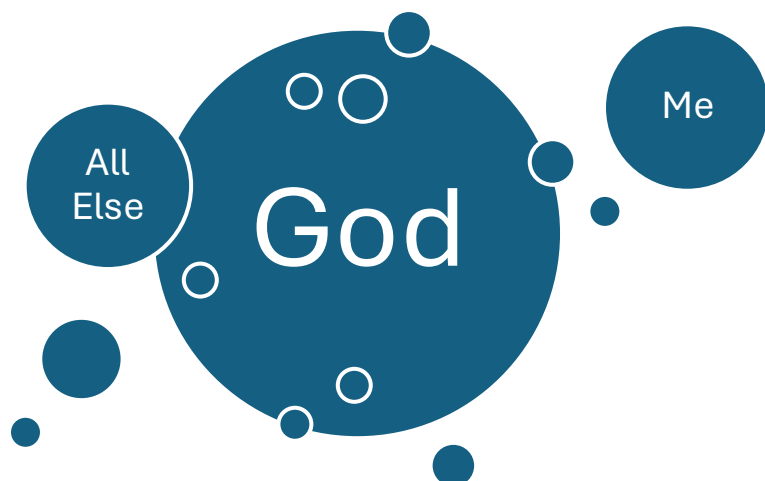
Probably something along the lines of "Jesus died on the cross for me, to forgive my sins, and what a difference he has made in my life." A true statement and a wonderful one. But how much more sweeping and comprehensive is the way Paul frames in the Good News.

Jesus is the King. All things have been placed under his feet. He is the head over everything.

Think again for a moment of that great lever of Archimedes, and of this great letter of Paul's.



Who occupies the center of your life? Is it the person who belongs there, the One who made you for himself, to love and serve him, the one who bought you at a price?



Part of the purpose of this letter is to serve as a lever to pry us out of the center, and restore the King to his proper place, on his throne, at the center, the head of everything

To rescue us from lives bent in upon ourselves to lives of love opened up toward God and out toward others.

It is a lever to move us out of the way, so that God can do in us and through us whatever he wants to do, bringing about a deep yes in us to the King, whose spirit is at work in us to transform us into his own likeness.

As one who used to be an atheist, with life centered on me, this isn't just theory for me. This is my experience – Jesus taking me back out of the center, and putting himself there in his rightful place. Many of you give evidence of that same radical displacement in your lives.

All of which lead leads to the last three connected words, which I'll touch on briefly.

Why is God doing this?

Glory

For his glory.

If we heard that another human being was seeking their own glory, that might cause us some concern. But the *glory* of God is just another way of talking about his *reputation*, how people come to understand the heart of God. According to Paul, God's redemptive work in history is meant to put on display the beauty of his heart and character.

Listen to how this theme shows up in this letter:

Ephesians 1.5-6

God has planned all of this *to the praise of his glorious grace*

Ephesians 1.11-12

God chose us to participate in his plan that we might be *for the praise of his glory*.

Ephesians 2.6-7

God raised us from death to life with Christ in order *that in the coming ages he might show or put on display the incomparable riches of his grace*, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 3.21

To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

That last passage leads directly to the next key word. How does glory come to God?

Live

By how we *live*. This is a theme Paul touches on again and again, especially in the second half of the book.

In this letter, Paul will urge us to live no longer under the influence of the evil one, in a life of sin (2.2), but instead to live as a new person, doing good works we were created to do (2.10), living in a new way of life (4.17), living as children of light (5.8), and being careful of how we live (5.15).

How the people of God *live* is one of the most important ways that God's reputation gets formed by the people around us. Who we are and how we relate and how we are different from the surrounding world is the primary way God establishes his reputation in the world. To him be glory *in the church*.

That's why the overarching theme of the whole second half of the book is how we live as the people of God.

Ephesians 4.1

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life [or walk] worthy of the calling you have received.

What sort of reputation are we establishing for God? What conclusions about Jesus are people drawing from the way you live your life?

That leads us to the last of the most important key words in this letter.

Of all that we could be known for, what is that most important distinguishing mark that should characterize us as children of God and subjects of the King?

Love

A life of *love*.

Twenty-one times, Paul speaks of *love*. First he speaks of the love of God for us.

Ephesians 3.17-19

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

He says our belovedness should be the truest thing of all about us. We should "define ourselves radically as ones loved by God." (John Eagen)

Then he turns the corner, and makes it absolutely clear that, as ones who have been chosen in love, and forgiven in love, and made new in love, as people for whom God's love for us is the thing that *defines* us, our love for others is the thing that should *distinguish* us.

Ephesians 5.2

Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

In writing that, Paul is echoing Jesus, who said in John 13.35

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

This week a bunch of us got together to talk about Allen Levi's wonderful book *Theo of Golden*.

In an interview about the book, Allen said it was an attempt to answer the question: "What does it mean to live a life of love?"

He said this is the one truth on which the whole book was built:

If we are going to live our lives well, we have to pray it all comes from a well of love, and that can only come from God to us.

A lawyer asked Jesus what is the great commandment, and he said, "Love God, love your neighbor." And that is what life is about. Sometimes it can be hard to know if we are doing it well or not, but that is what life is about.

All of us want to be able to put our head on the pillow at the end of the day and be able to say honestly, "I loved well today." And I think at the end of our lives, it would be nice if we could say: "Lord, I didn't do it perfectly, but my aim was to love."

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What a gift God gives us in this letter, and what an adventure it will be for us as a church family to walk through it together.

In the uncertainties of life, many of us can go through life with a sense of being untethered, not anchored to anything that is sure and certain.

Many of the things we once felt we could rely on have proven themselves to be inadequate to hold us fast and give us lasting peace and hope.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul lays out God's grand redemptive plan, and then he invites us to anchor ourselves to God's glorious purposes, and to find our story within his story.

In this letter, Paul invites us to see the cosmic scope of God's redemptive purposes, uniting all things together under his Son, the King. He invites us to find ourselves within that larger redemptive story, and to anchor ourselves to God's loving purposes in human history through Christ.

And then he invites us to live the sort of lives of love, with each other and with those God places around us, that reflect Christ's place of kingship in our lives, and make him known in this world.

Let's conclude our services by standing and praising the One who is our King and Lord, the One who has brought us from death to life, and then sent us out, like Paul, as his representatives in this world, re-presenting him wherever he sends us.