



Week 1: Bigger Ephesians 1:1-14

GOAL:

To get a glimpse of God's bigger story for our own lives and for our church by understanding the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ.

CHECKLIST

- Reach out individually to all group members (new or returning) to welcome them and to give details about this week's GG meeting.
- Prepare for your group meeting by praying for yourself and your group (feel free to use the prayer below) and reading through this Leader's Guide.
- Spend time catching up with your group and meeting any new members.
- Discuss any logistics for your group (weekly schedule, snack signup, scheduling your Grow Group Prayer Night, etc).
- Take attendance in Planning Center, including guests/new members (please include their names and contact info in the meeting notes section). Help new members register for your group using the QR code in your room or at vrbc.net/grow.

PREPARING THROUGH PRAYER:

Father, I find myself filled with wonder that, before the foundation of the world, you had a plan that included us. Through Jesus, you chose us and redeemed us. You continue to lavish your grace on us. You call us to be a part of your ongoing work to bring the love of Christ to the world. You generously resource us through the wisdom and power of your Holy Spirit. Show us how to live each day "for the praise of your glory." Amen.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

CONNECT

Begin by introducing new members and catching up with returning members.

If you have new members: To help new members connect with the group, take time to let ALL members, both new and returning, introduce themselves. You can ask them to share basic info, like telling about their family or what they do during the day (work, school, etc.), or you can make it creative, like what their dream job would be, their favorite restaurant, etc.

All Groups: Since this is the first time your group will have been together in a month or so, spend some time checking in to find out how each person's break was. Give each group member the opportunity to share what's been happening in their lives over the last few weeks. You might use "highs/lows" or just ask them to share a thing or two about their break. As people share, you may want to take note of any items for prayer. Then open your group in prayer.

COORDINATE

Spend a few minutes covering any details the group needs to know:

Schedule:

1. Go over any specific schedule notes. Remember, the semester schedule is always available for you on our Grow Group Leader Tools page (<https://www.vrbc.net/ggleaders>).
2. Decide on a date in October or early November for your Grow Group Prayer Night. Be sure everyone marks this date on their calendars. Email Amy with your date also. (Thanks!)

Roles: This is a great time to invite people to serve in the group. Confirm who will serve as your Inreach Coordinator this semester, and let Amy know. You might ask some people to plan a social event, others to coordinate snacks, and others to help greet everyone (and especially any visitors) as they arrive. Also, please be thinking about who in your group you'd like to ask to facilitate one week during the semester.

PRAY

Be sure to open the group in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to speak to you through God's Word, and asking God to transform our lives through our study and conversation together. Also use this time to pray for any requests that were shared during the CONNECT section above.

DISCUSS

Leaders: We are beginning a new sermon series called “Prototype” drawn from the book of Ephesians. This series will focus on the church – who we are, what our purpose is, and how we live that purpose out. There will be a few intermissions, but this series will carry on into the spring.

Read Ephesians 1:1-14.

- At the beginning of his sermon, Pastor John gave some examples of stories where the main characters discover that they are destined for something much bigger, much greater than they could have imagined for themselves. Who are some biblical characters that discovered God had greater plans for them than they could have imagined? What attitudes were most needed to join God in his plans?

Leaders: Your group will probably not struggle at all to think of examples from Scripture. Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Mary, Peter and Paul are just a few. To be a part of God’s bigger story, they trusted God, surrendered to him, and put God’s purposes above their own.

- Look at verses 3-14. What are the specific spiritual blessings that Paul is praising God for in this passage? Make a list and talk about them.

Leaders: Remember that this beginning portion of Paul’s letter is a doxology – a hymn of praise to God. It was not uncommon in Paul’s day for a letter to begin with some kind of prayer or blessing. Paul often includes prayers for the churches he is writing to. The Ephesian letter is a little unusual in that the first chapter includes a hymn, a thanksgiving, and a prayer. Paul’s main purpose is to point to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus. HE is the initiator of everything because of his love and grace! GOD is the primary actor. All praise goes to him. Paul is busting out in effusive praise to God. It reads like a sudden cascade of waterfalls!

The NIV translation covers up the word play a little bit in verse 3. Paul opens by saying, in a more literal sense, “Blessed be God for blessing us with spiritual blessings!” What are “spiritual blessings” anyway? Simply put, they are all the gifts that God has given to enable life with God. The phrase “in the heavenly realms” does not mean that we only experience these in heaven. Paul is not describing a location but a spiritual reality in the here and now – God’s world in which believers have a share – a larger reality where Christ is already Lord and his followers receive their identity and resources from a higher or larger realm.

And don’t forget to notice that these are all spiritual blessings IN CHRIST. Paul uses this phrase or related phrases MANY times. You will notice well over a dozen references to Christ in these verses. You might invite your group to notice how often this occurs.

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As you make your list, let your group discover and explore for themselves each of these blessings as much as possible, but here is some supplementary help. Your group may divide them into more categories than are outlined here.

- *Holiness (v. 4): We should notice from the start that God's concern is for our transformation into his likeness – holy and blameless. Paul will unpack this more in chapters 4-6. One commentator says, "Life from God results in transformed life with God." We were created in his image. Sin marred that image. But God's plan is that his image in us be restored.*
- *Adoption (vs. 5-6): The emphasis here on adoption points to God's purpose as relational. Adoption was a legal term in Paul's day that implied having full standing as an heir. Notice that God's motivation is love and that he does it in full accord with his pleasure and will. And all of this points to his amazing grace freely given to us "in the One he loves" (Jesus). Because of God's great love and grace we are fully included in his family. We are heirs together with Jesus. We belong to him. But adoption doesn't just bring privilege, it also brings responsibility. We are called to join him in his work in the world.*

(Pastor John speaks a little to the confusing ideas of "election" and "free will" a little in his sermon. He reminds us that both are in scripture and the two are not in conflict. There's no need to dwell on it in this lesson, but perhaps the important idea to keep in mind is that "election" or "predestination" simply implies that the initiative is always with God based on his grace.

- *Redemption (vs. 7-8a): Redemption involves the idea of purchasing or buying something back, an item or person that would otherwise be lost, imprisoned, or destroyed. It was often used in connection with the purchase of a slave's freedom. The price paid for us is the blood of Christ. Forgiveness of sins is added as further explanation. But Paul doesn't use the typical Greek word for forgiveness here. He uses one that implies the idea of "release" which goes along with the idea of redemption. We are "released" from our sin and the indictment that comes along with sin because of Jesus' sacrificial death on our behalf.*
- *Revelation of God's Will (vs. 8b-12): Paul now moves on to God's revelation of his plan which he purposed all along in Christ. What is his plan? To bring unity to all things in heaven and earth under Christ. The amazing part is that we are part of the plan! We are not only saved by Christ, we are part of God bringing his full plan to fruition. We have been "chosen" to "be for the praise of his glory." Paul unpacks this further in chapter 2 by talking about his "new society" made possible through Christ. This is the bigger story for our church that Pastor John is referring to in his sermon. We have been given access and participation in his redeeming work in the world.*
- *The Holy Spirit (v. 13-14): As a result of faith in the gospel truth, we are "marked in him" with the Holy Spirit. At conversion, all believers receive the Spirit as both a "seal" and "deposit." Seals convey authenticity and ownership. The Holy Spirit living in us verifies that we belong to God. Paul refers to it as "the promised" Holy Spirit, referring to prophecy like that of Joel, when God says that he will pour out his spirit on all people, sons and daughters (Joel 2:28). A deposit is a downpayment that guarantees full payment to come. The Holy Spirit in us is just the first installment on our salvation and our inheritance as sons and daughters of God.*

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- Which of these blessings do you tend to struggle to believe for yourself? Why? Which one do you find yourself most grateful for right now?

Leaders: *This is an opportunity to invite your group members to make this hymn of praise personal. It's possible to get overwhelmed by all the theology. But invite your group to look at each idea and interact personally with at least one.*

- What effect should knowledge of these spiritual blessings have on how we view our identity as followers of Jesus?

Leaders: *When we understand and trust that these things are true of us and for us, we have an identity and a purpose that is extraordinary. These blessings give reason for why our lives should look completely different from those who are not followers of Jesus. Our priorities, our goals, our stewardship of time and money, our desires for our children, our vocational calling – everything is centered in Christ and making his name renowned as we learn about him, become like him, and do the kinds of things he did.*

Our human tendency is to somehow gloss over or dilute or forget. But to truly grasp what all of these spiritual blessings mean would result in lives that look to no other source to define who they are. Everything is lifted to a higher reality and a higher purpose. Such a purpose gives us a filter for knowing what is truly important. It gives us focus and opens us up to things God may want to do through us that we could never imagine on our own.

- What do we tend to think the purpose of the church is? How does this align with Paul's description in this passage (see verses 11-12)? What kind of bigger story might God have in mind for VRBC?

Leaders: *Ask your group to name various purposes for the church that they think of or have heard. Many examples focus on things that are not bad or wrong in and of themselves, but they point to our tendency to make the church about our needs or preferences. God has something MUCH BIGGER in mind! God's purpose is that "we might be for the praise of HIS GLORY!"*

What does this look like at VRBC? How might we continue to surrender ourselves to a bigger story as we are led by God? What sacrifices might this require? What attitudes might this require? (Think back to the opening question about those who surrendered to God's bigger story in scripture.)

We talk often these days about being in a "new season" with Pastor John leading the way. Will we eagerly discern together what God is calling us to in this new season? Will we commit to dive deeper into sacrificial obedience for the sake of God's kingdom?

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PRAY

1. How does this beautiful hymn of praise (vs. 3-14) prompt you to pray for yourself and for our church? Ask several to voice prayers in response to what they've heard from God's Word.
2. Use the Forward Together Prayer Guide to pray that our church will continue to grow in our love for one another (see Day 42).
3. For a closing, you might have your group stand together while you read this blessing over them:

"May you be reminded again and again of who you are IN CHRIST:

- *You have been chosen to be holy and blameless in his sight.*
- *You have been adopted into his family through Jesus.*
- *You have been redeemed and forgiven because of God's grace lavished on you.*
- *You have been called to participate in God's big story and bring him praise.*
- *You have been given the Holy Spirit as a seal and deposit guaranteeing your life with God now and forever.*

All this so that we might be for the praise of his glory – trophies of grace on full display!"

AMEN.