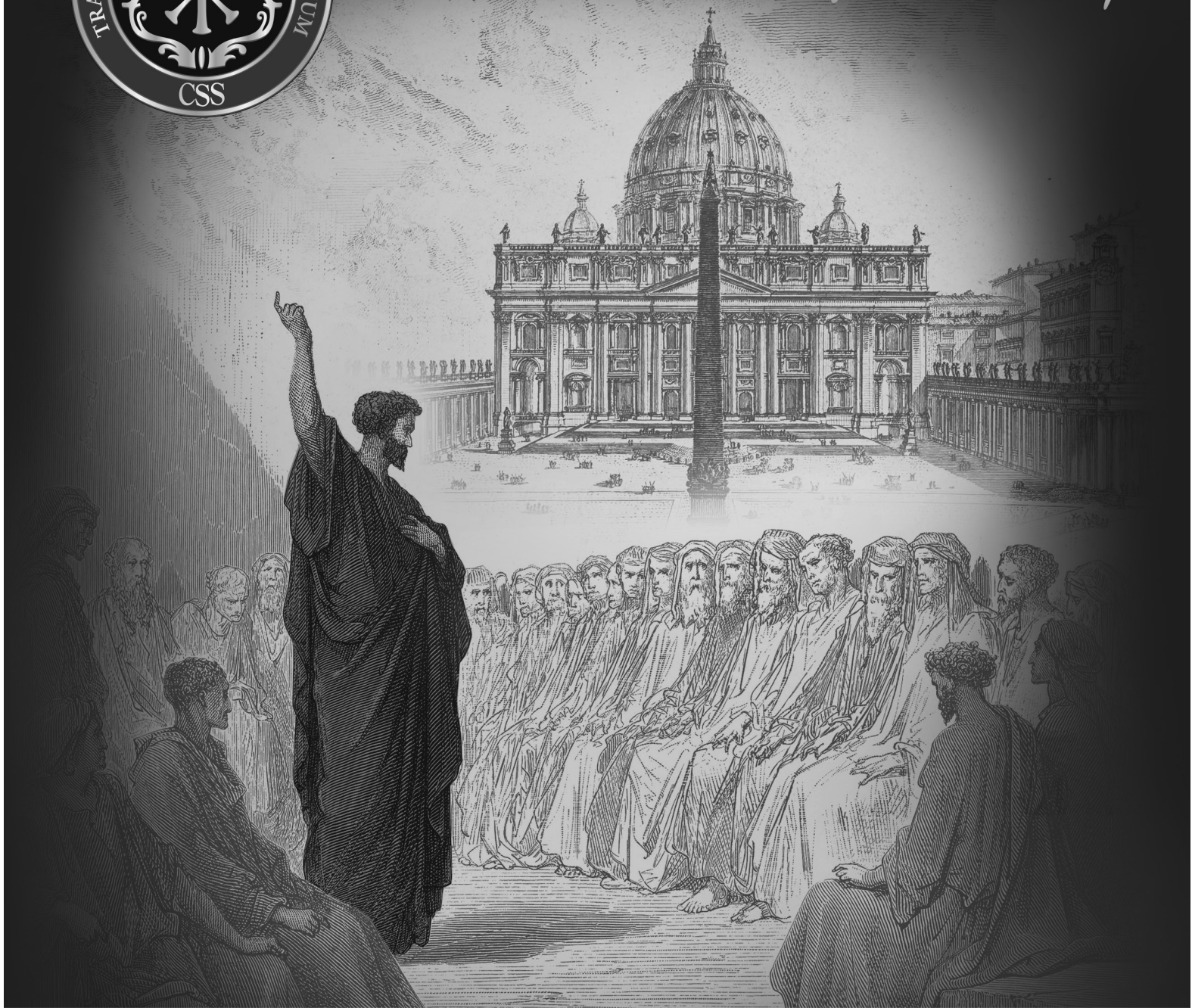




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# THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE EPHESIANS

by Dr. Scott Hahn & Mark Shea



Catholic Scripture Study International  
9409 Pendennis Lane  
Charlotte, NC 28210

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Printed in the United States of America  
First impression 2012

Edited by Sandra Bennett Fountain

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# The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians

*A Bible Study by Dr. Scott Hahn and Mark Shea*



# Ephesians

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## *Table of Contents*

<b>Introduction:</b>	The Mystery of Jesus Christ	1
<b>Lesson 1:</b>	The Praise of His Glory ( <i>Eph 1:1-14</i> )	5
<b>Lesson 2:</b>	Jesus Is Head over All Things ( <i>Eph 1:15-23</i> )	13
<b>Lesson 3:</b>	Seated in Heavenly Places ( <i>Eph 2:1-10</i> )	21
<b>Lesson 4:</b>	Access in One Spirit to the Father ( <i>Eph 2:11-22</i> )	29
<b>Lesson 5:</b>	The Mystery Hidden and Revealed ( <i>Eph 3:1-13</i> )	37
<b>Lesson 6:</b>	The Glory in the Temple ( <i>Eph 3:14-21</i> )	45
<b>Lesson 7:</b>	Exhortation to Unity ( <i>Eph 4:1-16</i> )	51
<b>Lesson 8:</b>	Moral Maturity in the Church ( <i>Eph 4:17—5:20</i> )	59
<b>Lesson 9:</b>	Household Life in the Church ( <i>Eph 5:21—6:9</i> )	69
<b>Lesson 10:</b>	Spiritual Warfare and Farewell ( <i>Eph 6:10-24</i> )	77
<b>Scripture Memory Verses</b>		85

## Introduction

# Ephesians

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## *The Mystery of Jesus Christ*



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## **Christology, Cosmology, and Eschatology**

The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians has, as its theme, the mystery of Jesus Christ. It focuses upon his Incarnation and its effects. This means that the “mystery of Christ” as it’s expounded by St. Paul in Ephesians, refers not merely to the mystery of the person of Jesus Christ, but even more to the mystical body of Christ, the Church.

In this study, we are going to see how the Church relates to Christ, to the entire universe that the Father has redeemed through the Son, and to the glorious plan of God that will be consummated at the end of time. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians is a meditation upon the mystery of Jesus Christ as it’s lived out in the body of Christ, and readers are led into the most profound depths of Christology (the study of Jesus Christ himself ), cosmology (the study of the cosmos), and eschatology (the study of Last Things). This is St. Paul’s perspective in approaching the mystery of Jesus Christ. His goal is to open the minds of ordinary believers to contemplation of the extraordinary and beautiful reality that Jesus Christ has established, and then to show what practical differences these glorious truths can make in everyday human lives. He means to lead readers into the awareness that everything men and women do is charged with divine power because members of the Church are now cells in the living body of Jesus Christ.

## **Circumstances Surrounding Authorship of the Letter to the Ephesians**

In many ways, Ephesians is one of the most difficult of the Pauline epistles to pin down in terms of authorship, audience, date, and place of composition. This study will take a traditional position and argue that St. Paul probably wrote his letter from prison in Rome in the spring of 63 A.D., and that it was sent to the Church at Ephesus. Credible scholars hold a wide variety of opinions about these matters, however. The Fathers of the early Church always attributed this epistle to St. Paul. However, since the 19th century, it’s been widely asserted that St. Paul did not write the epistle to the Ephesians. There are several reasons for this opinion. First, the letter does not begin with the customary thanksgiving and greetings that are customary in most of St. Paul’s other epistles. Second, there’s a remarkable similarity between the language of Ephesians and the language of the epistle to the Colossians. Many scholars argue that this indicates Ephesians is composed by a disciple of St. Paul writing after his death and drawing on ideas in the Letter to the

## ***Ephesians Introduction***

Colossians. Third, and supremely, many scholars argue that the theology of Ephesians is simply too theologically advanced and the understanding and exaltation of the Church is too high for St. Paul to have written it.

The first reply to these objections, is that the reason there might not be personal greetings in the Letter to the Ephesians is because St. Paul spent more than two years living in Ephesus (*Acts* 19:10). During that time, he would have known hundreds of people. Given that, it would be very difficult for him to single out anyone for greeting without offending others. It's also possible that the Letter to the Ephesians was intended as a sort of "encyclical" to a group of Christian communities centered around Ephesus. That is, it may first have been written to the Church at Ephesus but was intended to be circulated to many other communities as well. Support for this "encyclical" theory includes the fact that many manuscripts of Ephesians omit the words "at Ephesus" from Ephesians 1:1. If this theory is correct, the omission of greetings makes perfect sense since the epistle would be appealing to a somewhat broader audience consisting of a constellation of Christian communities located in the area of Ephesus.

Second, the similarities between Ephesians and Colossians need not be explained by recourse to some utterly unknown later writer borrowing from St. Paul. They can be explained much more simply by saying that the Letters to the Colossians, the Ephesians, and Philemon were all written within a short time by one man—St. Paul—and carried from St. Paul's place of imprisonment to the communities around Ephesus and Colossae by one of St. Paul's disciples, a man named Tychicus. In that view, the reason that the Letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians sound so similar is because St. Paul has similar thoughts on his mind as he's writing to two communities in Asia Minor that are not terribly far from one another and that share a good deal in common. Notably, both Colossians and Ephesians indicate that Tychicus was the person carrying these letters.

In addition, Colossians mentions that "Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of yourselves" is accompanying Tychicus on his journey. It's none other than Onesimus, the runaway slave who became a believer, who is the subject of the Letter to Philemon. In addition, the Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon contain greetings from the same group of St. Paul's companions (Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Demas, and Luke). Lending weight to the possibility that the Letter to the Ephesians was intended to be read by several communities, St. Paul writes to the Colossians, "when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the Church of the Laodiceans" (*Col* 4:16). Rather than attribute Ephesians to some hypothetical writer, a much more plausible synthesis of the biblical data is that all three of these Letters (Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon) were written by St. Paul within a short time, carried by Tychicus to their destinations in Asia minor, and delivered in the same "mail run." Their literary similarities are due, not to plagiarism or imitation by a later writer, but to the fact that St. Paul sounds like himself when he is writing to similar audiences about similar things. Like any good writer, once he has composed good ideas in memorable language, he re-uses that language when he wants to say the same thing to another audience.

In answer to the third objection to Pauline authorship, it's necessary to discuss the rest of what is known about Ephesus and St. Paul's relationship to that city. In the days of St. Paul, Ephesus

was the leading city in Asia Minor. It was situated between Miletus and Smyrna, about three miles from the Aegean Sea. It had been conquered by Alexander the Great around 334 B.C. and had come under Roman dominion around 130 B.C. From ancient times, the city had been known throughout Asia Minor because of its association with the goddess Artemis (also known as Diana). Indeed, the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, which St. Paul undoubtedly saw many times, was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. Ephesus also was known as a center of the occult. Magical practices were extremely common there. Thus, the citizens of Ephesus were known throughout Asia Minor both for being superstitious and for being adept at magical or spiritual powers (not unlike some participants in the New Age movement today). When St. Paul brings the gospel to Ephesus, accompanied by signs and wonders, it results in massive renunciation of magic and pagan belief. And, as the nineteenth chapter of the book of Acts discloses, this in turn threatens the close relationship between the various religious, spiritualist, and occult currents in Ephesus and the Ephesian economy. In Acts, a silversmith named Demetrius complains that St. Paul's preaching of monotheism is beginning to threaten the livelihood of craftsmen who fashion idols of Artemis for sale. This provokes a riot against St. Paul and the Church and St. Paul leaves the area soon afterwards—but not without leaving behind a Church that is deeply steeped in his teaching.

### **St. Paul's Attachment to Ephesus**

St. Paul stayed in Ephesus longer than any other place in his entire missionary travels. He spent two full years there around 52 A.D., teaching first in the synagogue and then, after being driven from there, in the public venue of the Hall of Tyrannus. Nowhere else in the ministry of St. Paul described in Scripture is it recorded that St. Paul stayed so long and taught so much. Ephesus was also graced by the preaching of Apollos before St. Paul arrived and, according to tradition, was the city where St. John and the Blessed Virgin Mary eventually made their home. The spiritual richness of catechesis given in that city scarcely was matched anywhere else in the world at that time.

This matters enormously in confronting the problem of the extremely sophisticated ecclesiology or study of the Church that critics of Pauline authorship point to as evidence that St. Paul couldn't have written the Letter to the Ephesians. The author focuses on the mystery of Jesus Christ that is the Church. Very little time is devoted to the Incarnation or even the doctrine of justification by faith as in the Letters to the Romans and the Galatians. Rather, the writer is transported by discussions of Christ's Church "which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (*Eph* 1:23). In Ephesians, the Church is the means by which God redeems the cosmos. Critics wonder how the author of the Letters to the Romans and the Galatians could pen such an exalted view of the Church.

St. Paul could do so because he was addressing two different audiences with two very different levels of theological sophistication. In the case of the Roman and Galatian churches, St. Paul was writing to people who were perplexed and confused by issues surrounding justification by faith, and he addresses their issues. When he wrote to the Romans, St. Paul hadn't yet been to the Church in Rome. When he wrote Galatians he was speaking to people whom he had visited only briefly. In writing to the Ephesian community, however, St. Paul is writing to group of believers who had been catechized from his own lips for two years. They were therefore past the stage of

## ***Ephesians Introduction***

drinking milk and were ready for strong meat. Accordingly, The Letter to the Ephesians is written to usher that well-instructed community into the stratospheric upper reaches of St. Paul's teaching about Jesus Christ's saving plan and power. Precisely because St. Paul can write beyond the ABC's of justification by faith and the elementary controversies that still disturb the peace of the Galatian and Roman Churches, he's free to speak from the pinnacle of his thought to show forth the glorious achievement of Jesus Christ in the mystery of his mystical body, the Church.

## **Outline of the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians**

- 1. Opening Address (1:1-2)**
- 2. Doctrinal Exposition (1:3—3:21)**
  - A. Divine Origin of the Church (1:3-14)
  - B. Prayer for the Church (1:15-23)
  - C. Building up of the Church (2:1-22)
  - D. Mystery of the Church (3:1-13)
  - E. Prayer for the Church (3:14-21)
- 3. Moral Exhortation (4:1—6:20)**
  - A. Unity of the Church (4:1-16)
  - B. Moral Maturity in the Church (4:17—5:20)
  - C. Household life in the Church (5:21—6:9)
  - D. Spiritual Warfare in the Church (6:10-20)
- 4. Closing Farewell (6:21-24)**

## **Rome to Home**

Pope John Paul II called the Bible the “path to happiness” because through the words of Scripture God reveals fundamental morality.

In the Bible, God not only reveals himself but also the path to happiness. This is a theme that regards not only believers but, in a certain sense, every person of good will. Through the Bible, God speaks and reveals himself and indicates the solid basis and certain orientation for human behavior. The fundamental behaviors of biblical morality are: knowing God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ; recognizing his infinite goodness; knowing with a grateful and sincere soul that ‘all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights’; discovering in the gifts that God has given us the duties that he has entrusted to us; and acting in full awareness of our responsibilities in this regard. The Bible presents to us the inexhaustible riches of this Revelation of God and of his love for humanity.

—speaking to the 2004 assembly  
of the Pontifical Biblical Commission

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## Lesson 1

# Ephesians

## *The Praise of His Glory*



### Introduction

The first half of the Letter to the Ephesians is essentially a prayer and extended meditation on the mystery of Jesus Christ as revealed through his body, the Church. The second half of is a set of practical instructions for Christians. The gist of the last three chapters is, “Now that we are living in the mystical reality described in the first three chapters, what do we do as parents, workers, children, and citizens of the wide and fallen world?” Many modern readers dislike dealing with the “theological stuff” of the first three chapters and tend to demand that St. Paul hurry on to the “practical matters.” St. Paul, however, insists that men and women cannot be truly practical apart from contemplation. And he insists that contemplation cannot be cut short merely because the subject matter is lofty. God has made the human mind, not to be forever open (that’s a false ideal of a relativistic age), but to bite down upon truth as the open mouth is meant to bite down on food. Men and women feed upon truth and are nourished and strengthened by God’s revelation in Christ and through his Church. Practical actions flow from a well-ordered soul, and a well-ordered soul depends upon being firmly rooted in the life of the Blessed Trinity. St. Paul bids his readers to stop and gaze for a while upon the beauty of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Trinity and in Christ’s mystical body, the Church. St. Paul begins his Letter to the Ephesians by reflecting upon doctrinal truths: the mystery of Jesus Christ, the fruit of the Incarnation, and the graces that come through salvation. He uses such words as “election,” “sonship,” “grace,” “redemption,” “forgiveness,” “revelation,” “unity,” and “inheritance.” His goal is to show how the life of the Blessed Trinity is poured out to the world through Christ and even displayed before the heavenly powers, not merely through the person of Jesus Christ, but “through the Church.”

### Ephesians 1:1-14

**1** <sup>1</sup>Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus:

<sup>2</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup>**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,** <sup>4</sup>even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and

## **Ephesians 1:1-14**

blameless before him. <sup>5</sup>He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, <sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. <sup>7</sup>In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <sup>8</sup>which he lavished upon us. <sup>9</sup>For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup>as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

<sup>11</sup>In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, <sup>12</sup>we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. <sup>13</sup>In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, <sup>14</sup>who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

*[Please Note: One of the best ways to meditate on God's Word is through memorization. A suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the Scripture text, or you may choose a verse of your own.]*

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## **Study Questions**

**It's best to read all of Ephesians 1:1-14 and *Points to Ponder* before responding to the study questions. To aid in discussion, please note Scripture verses where you find your responses.**

### **Opening Greeting**

#### **Ephesians 1:1-2**

1. The Acts of the Apostles introduces readers to a man named Saul, who became St. Paul, a passionate servant of God. What else do readers learn about the St. Paul in Acts 22:3-16?

2. What were the qualifications for the apostle chosen to replace Judas, and how was he chosen (see *Acts* 1:21-22)? By whose will is St. Paul called to be an apostle? How does St. Paul meet the qualifications of an apostle (see *1 Cor* 15:3-11)?
  
3. St. Paul often begins his letters with a blessing of grace and peace (*Rom* 1:7 and *1 Cor* 1:3). In *Ephesians* 1:2, what does St. Paul mean by “grace” (see *Jn* 1:12-13 and paragraphs 1996 and 2000 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC]*)? What does he mean by “peace,” and how is St. Paul’s blessing of “peace” related to Jesus Christ (see *Isa* 9:6 and *Rom* 5:1)?

### **Benediction in Praise of the Father**

#### **Ephesians 1:3-6**

4. For what specifically does St. Paul praise God the Father in *Ephesians* 1:3? How is it that Christians are “in “the heavenly places”?”
  
5. St. Paul writes that God the Father “destined us in love.” Why does he emphasize “love” (see *1 Jn* 4:8)? How do Christians become sons and daughters of God the Father (see *Jn* 3:5 and *CCC* 1262 and *CCC* 1265)?

### **Benediction in Praise of the Son**

#### **Ephesians 1:7-12**

6. What is redemption (see *Col* 1:13-14 and *CCC* 571 and 601)? How do Christians gain redemption (see *Rom* 3:24 and *Heb* 9:12)?

### ***Ephesians Lesson 1 Study Questions***

7. A “mystery” in the New Testament is something that’s been hidden and now is revealed. What is the mystery of God’s will (see *CCC* 51)?
8. Ephesians 1:12 mentions those who first hoped in Christ. What exactly is hope, CCC for definition and of what does hope in Jesus Christ consist (see *Rom* 5:2; *Gal* 5:5; *Titus* 1:2; 2:13; 3:7; and *Heb* 6:18-20)?

### **Benediction in Praise of the Holy Spirit Ephesians 1:13-14**

9. What is the “word of truth”? With what are we “sealed” (see *2 Cor* 1:22)? How are we sealed (see *CCC* 698)?
10. What is our inheritance (*1 Pet* 1:3-5)? How is the Holy Spirit the “guarantee” or first down payment of that (see *CCC* 1107)?

### **Questions for Reflection**

**The following questions are designed to help you reflect further about how ideas in Ephesians 1:1-14 might apply to your own life:**

1. St. Paul’s life was changed forever after he met Christ on the road to Damascus. Have you ever had a “Damascus Road experience”? What difference does it make in your understanding of the world to see God as a loving Father and not merely as a Creator or Omnipotent Power?

2. Acrostics are an interesting way to remember important words. An acrostic for the word “grace” is: God’s riches at Christ’s expense. Can you think of an acrostic for “peace”? How about “hope”?

## **Opportunities for Additional Study**

### **Points to Ponder—*Ephesians 1:1-14***

#### **Trinitarian Blessing**

The opening benediction in Ephesians 1:3-14 follows a Trinitarian structure that speaks, in turn, of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It does so because St. Paul wants to initiate us into the mysteries that are disclosed in the coming of Jesus. In the words of Pope John Paul II, “Our God in his deepest mystery is not a solitude, but a family, since he has in himself fatherhood, sonship and the essence of the family, which is love.” Ephesians is about our incorporation into and participation in the life of the ultimate family: the Trinitarian life of holy Church. Through that incorporation “all things” whether “things in heaven and things on earth” are to be united “in him.”

Ephesians 1:3-14 is the longest known sentence in Greek. But it’s not simply an elaborate, rambling stream of consciousness. Rather, the evidence points to a very carefully constructed blessing intended to link all of the key words that St. Paul will expound in the rest of his epistle. It’s a kind of literary overture to all the subsequent themes of the letter in an extremely compact form. Some scholars have even noted that the order of words in this benediction is matched by the order in which these terms appear later in the letter. In fact, many scholars suggest that St. Paul intended this passage to be sung as a hymn and that this section of the letter served a liturgical function as an extended meditation on the blessings of the sacrament of Baptism.

#### **The Mystery of God’s Will**

The summit of St. Paul’s benediction in this passage is found in Ephesians 1:9. St. Paul summarizes his reason for praising God: “For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will.” That’s why St. Paul writes. God has made the mystery known and now St. Paul makes the mystery known—as he’ll write a few verses later of “how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly” (*Eph 3:1*). St. Paul writes this in humility and makes it plain that such revelation depends not on his intelligence, but on a pure gift of grace. That’s why he speaks of it as “revelation, “which” was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit,” (*Eph 3:5*). It’s not that other generations were stupid, it’s that other generations lived before the incarnation, death, resurrection and outpouring of the Spirit of the Son of God who comes from the Father.

## ***Ephesians Lesson 1 Points to Ponder***

Moreover, the substance of the “mystery of his will”, so far from being elitist and exclusive, is expansive and joyful, for it’s this: “the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (*Eph 3:6*). The divine family depends, not on natural birth or on racial and ethnic ties, but on the supernatural gift of participation in the divine family life of the Blessed Trinity.

In other words, the “mystery” of Christ upon which Ephesians focuses is not the mystery of the Incarnation. It’s not the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. It’s not even the mystery of justification by faith. Other letters, such as Galatians or Romans, deal with these matters, not because they’re at the summit of St. Paul’s thoughts and prayers, but because they’re elementary teachings over which the Galatians and Romans are still stumbling. But in Ephesians St. Paul is talking to a community that’s extremely well-catechized and which is ready to hear “the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (*Eph 3: 9-10*). The “mystery of Christ” in Ephesians is the Church. That’s why, for St. Paul, the oneness of the Church cannot be separated from the oneness of God. Today the Catholic Church retains both the “unity of the Spirit” and catholicity of one body with many parts. And that’s why St. Paul’s benediction begins on such a strong Trinitarian note, for St. Paul means to root everything that follows in the Trinitarian life of God.

### **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**

*“O eternal Trinity, You are a deep sea in which the more I seek the more I find, and the more I find, the more I seek to know You.”*

—St. Catherine of Siena



And so, Ephesians 1:3-6 begins with the praise of God the Father, then St. Paul moves (*Eph 1:7-12*) to the praise of God the Son in whom we have redemption and concludes (*Eph 1:13*) with the praise of God the Spirit. And the Spirit “seals” us as a kind of down payment on our inheritance which is heaven. For heaven isn’t merely a place, it’s participation in the life of the Blessed Trinity himself. In short, our salvation is a family affair. The God who saves us is not a “fear” or a “fate.” Indeed, he’s more than Creator or Lawgiver or Judge. Such terms describe what he does, but not who he is. For only in Christ is God revealed for who he is: a Father who sends us his Beloved Son to give us the Spirit of sonship making us brothers and sisters in Christ. God is only Creator and Lawgiver once he creates and gives the Law. But he’s Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from all eternity.

This is why the dogma of the Blessed Trinity isn’t a meaningless abstract theological statement with no relationship to our lives. Rather, the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity is another way of saying that God is love. And St. Paul’s insistence on rooting the Church in the reality of the Blessed Trinity is, in fact, an insistence on saying that we are called to participate in the eternal, ecstatic life and love which is God himself.

## Catechism Connections

- To understand why God revealed himself, see *CCC* 51.
- To learn more about the mystery of redemption in Christ, see *CCC* 517.
- To read more about why St. Paul calls the nuptial union of Christ and the Church, “a great mystery,” see *CCC* 772.

## Rome to Home

Pope John Paul II explained how the Blessed Virgin Mary experienced the “riches of God’s grace:”

Mary’s pure and immaculate conception is thus seen as the beginning of the new creation. It is a question of a personal privilege granted to the woman chosen to be Christ’s Mother, who ushers in the time of abundant grace willed by God for all humanity. This doctrine, taken up again in the eighth century by St. Germanus of Constantinople and St. John Damascene, sheds light on the value of Mary’s original holiness, presented as the beginning of the world’s Redemption. In this way the Church’s tradition assimilates and makes explicit the authentic meaning of the title “full of grace” given by the angel to the Blessed Virgin. Mary is full of sanctifying grace and is so from the first moment of her existence. This grace, according to the Letter to the Ephesians (1:6), is bestowed in Christ on all believers. Mary’s original holiness represents the unsurpassable model of the gift and the distribution of Christ’s grace in the world.

—general audience, May 15, 1996

## Summary

### **In Ephesians 1:1-14, we observed that:**

1. St. Paul is writing to express, not merely the basic teaching of justification by faith, but to explore the heights of the mystery of the Trinity as the Trinity is revealed through the Church.
2. St. Paul's opening benediction is a hymn of praise to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for his gift of salvation in Christ.
3. The "mystery of his will" is that through the Church, all Creation is being drawn into participation in the Trinitarian life of God.

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