

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Under Construction

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus)

Life, on Purpose

(Intro; Ephesians 1:1-23)

Study #1

Introduction: Useful...

A shovel is never happier than when it's digging a hole. Glue loves to bind things together. A hammer is delighted to bash in nails.

These are all tools, and tools find fulfillment in doing what they were made to do. That is their purpose.

All of us, too, are made to lead lives of purpose. Just like a shovel or a hammer - but to what end? What is our purpose? What is your purpose?

It can be inspiring to hear someone identify their life's purpose. But, in the words of Pastor Andy Stanley, this whole idea of "purpose" has a catch.

Think about the things you keep in your home. Every item has a purpose. If it didn't have a purpose, you wouldn't keep it.

Shovels and vacuum cleaners and toilet plungers and fly swatters all have purposes. And everything that has a purpose is a means to an end.

We don't keep a shovel around just because we want to have a shovel. We keep it because it works better than anything else when we need to dig a hole.

That is its purpose. It is a means to an end.

So, if I'm embracing a life of purpose, it means that I am saying "Yes!" to being the means to some end. I am not the "end" for which I exist. I am not the point. It's not all about me.

If I want purpose, I will agree to be the means to an end that is greater than I am. And this is true across the board.

A company doesn't exist for itself. Its *purpose* is to supply its customers. A school doesn't exist for itself. Its *purpose* is to educate its students.

If I devote myself solely to myself, at the end, all I'll have to show for myself is myself. Same for you. (thanks, Pastor Andy)

But, if we devote ourselves to something greater than ourselves, our lives have purpose and we find fulfillment.

Today, as we look into the Bible, the Apostle Paul will direct us to transcendent life purpose.

I'm excited that we're going to be working our way through Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus over the next few Sundays. It's a great letter and I believe it's perfectly "fit" for us, at this season in our church's life, and I hope you'll agree as we dig deep, together.

As we turn to the letter, you'll notice that Paul didn't begin his letter the way you begin your letters, emails, or texts today. You start by addressing the recipient. Not Paul.

Greetings from an Apostle (1:1-2)

Written by Paul (v. 1a)

[1:1] Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...

Just as surely as Simon Peter, James, John, Andrew, and Matthew were Jesus' apostles, so was Paul.

But all the others were chosen to be apostles before the Lord's crucifixion and resurrection. Paul, while still a bona fide apostle, was chosen after.

Here at the beginning, he wants his readers - then and now - to know who it is who is writing. He is Paul, the former *persecutor* of Jesus' followers, now the *persecuted* apostle of Jesus.

The people to whom he is writing knew Paul well, and I'll detail their relational history in a minute. But he was writing to people living in a place. That place was the city of Ephesus, located in present-day Turkey (Asia Minor).

Written to the Church at Corinth (v. 1b)

[1b] to the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus.

In Ephesus

You'll remember that 2018 marked the three-hundred-year birthday (Tri-Centennial) of San Antonio. That makes our city, by American standards, a pretty old town.

By the time Paul wrote this letter, in about AD 60, Ephesus was already seven hundred years old.

It had a good harbor on the Aegean Sea and a strong economy. It boasted a population of about a quarter million residents. It was a center of commerce and culture and politics in the region.

Ephesus was an important city in the first century Graeco-Roman world, and it was steeped in cultural and religious diversity.

There was a contingent of Jews who had landed there when persecution forced them out of Palestine during the Dispersion. These Jews worshiped the one true God and followed Moses' Law.

The gods and goddesses of classical Greece were worshiped in Ephesus. And there were other, very different religious options available from the east (we call them "mystery religions").¹

Religion was very important in Ephesus. In fact, the economy of the city was fueled primarily by the worship of one goddess, Artemis.² There was a temple for the worship of Artemis that was four times the size of the Athenian Parthenon.³

To this well-placed, ethnically diverse, idol-worshiping city of Ephesus, Paul brought the message of Jesus.

Paul and the Ephesians

The beginnings of Paul and the Ephesians

In AD 52, he and his good friends, Priscilla and Aquila, visited the city at the end of what we call the Second Missionary Journey.⁴

Paul was well-received, but he didn't stay long on that first visit. He finished that Second Missionary Journey, spent time back at his home church in Antioch and then left to begin the Third Missionary Journey.

¹ Goes by the name "Efes" today, in Turkey. If you went to Ephesus today, you would find that the ancient harbor is 5-7 miles from the coast. The process of the erosion of the land that led to the degrading of the harbor at Ephesus begun long before the first century AD. Deforestation (for building, charcoal, and farming) led to the rich topsoil of the region being washed into the sea.

² The worship of Artemis began as early as the 12th century BC. In Acts 19, reference is made to "***an image which fell from heaven,***" (v. 35) around which worship of the goddess revolved in Paul's day. This "***image***" was a meteoric stone (currently in the Liverpool City Museum in England) which fell to earth and which was believed to have been a gift of the gods. In Ephesus, the worship of Artemis consisted of "carnal fertility rituals, orgiastic rites, and temple prostitution." (Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, "Ephesus")

³ Croesus (6th century BC) began construction on the temple to Artemis in Ephesus. By New Testament times, the temple was widely depicted on coins.

⁴ Acts 18:19-21

Three years of ministry in Ephesus

When he and his younger friend, Timothy,⁵ arrived back at Ephesus, they found a dozen men who are identified only as **“disciples”**. (Acts 19:1)

Some time before Paul arrived, a man named Apollos had told them about John the Baptist. So, these guys weren’t disciples of Jesus, but of John.

Because of what Apollos told them about John the Baptist, these men knew about a coming Messiah, but they didn’t know anything about Jesus. They weren’t Christians.

So, Paul explained to them that the One John had promised was Jesus. He told them about Jesus’ life and ministry, His death and His resurrection.

When these disciples of John heard the Good News, they believed in Jesus and were saved. (John would have been thrilled!)

These twelve men formed the nucleus of the church in Ephesus. And, while training them to follow Jesus, Paul settled in for a long-term disciple-making ministry in the city.⁶

People came to faith in Christ as Paul preached in the Jewish synagogue in Ephesus. When he wore out his welcome in the synagogue, he moved to the school of a man named, Tyrannus,⁷ where he taught for two solid years.

More and more people believed in Jesus. The whole city learned about Jesus from Paul and from the growing group of believers.

⁵ Traveling with Paul were also Erastus, Luke (who wrote Acts), Gaius and Aristarchus. (See Acts 19)

⁶ We believe that Paul was in Ephesus from AD 53-56. (So, Harold Hoehner). His stay there is recorded in Acts 19:8ff.

⁷ We know next to nothing about Tyrannus. He may have been a Greek philosopher, a Jewish teacher, or a recent convert to Christianity.

Then, these who believed spread the word so that by the end of Paul’s three years in Ephesus, Luke (who wrote the book of Acts) could honestly report that **[Acts 19:10] all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.**

However, the longer Paul stayed in Ephesus, the fiercer became the opposition.

He even endured a riot that was started by craftsmen whose business of making idols was damaged because so many Ephesians were becoming Christians.⁸

Paul knew that his time in Ephesus had come to an end. But, as he left town, he left behind a church. This church faced opposition from outside along with some significant internal challenges.

His letter is written to the members of that church.

To the saints / believers in Christ Jesus

He called them **“saints”**. We learned last week that to call someone a **“saint”**, biblically speaking, is to say that they belong to God. Every Christian is a saint. If you believe in Jesus, you are a saint.

He also called them, **“the faithful in Christ Jesus”**. Or, as the words might be better translated, **“believers in Christ Jesus.”**⁹

⁸ Chief among these was Demetrius, a silversmith who profited from the idol-making industry in Ephesus. After pointing out that Paul’s ministry was damaging the city’s temple-based economy, he whipped a crowd into a frenzy by arousing sympathy for the goddess, Artemis. In 1 Corinthians 15:32, Paul likened the riot in Ephesus to **“fighting with wild beasts,”** a phrase he had picked up from Plato, who likened mob violence to wild animals.

⁹ So Harold Hoehner in his commentary. The Greek “pistoi” could mean **“faithful”** (relating to the readers’ character) or it could be translated **“believers”** (thus being explanatory / exegetical to “saints”). Hoehner marshalls evidence for the latter understanding, including reference to the material in the letter that deals with problems in the church caused by unfaithful Christians.

See, this letter is written to the diverse believers in the church at Ephesus. If someone believed in Jesus, it was for them, regardless of spirituality and regardless of Christian maturity.

But now, time has passed since Paul had been in Ephesus. Five years have passed. Paul has had lots more adventures and he's now under house arrest in Rome.

Concerned for his friends in Ephesus, he sat down to write them a letter.¹⁰

What he wrote to them could have easily been written to us.

Despite being two thousand years removed, Asia Minor vs North America, Greek vs. English, Ephesus vs. San Antonio, non-tech vs. high-tech, the crucial issues the church at Ephesus faced are the issues we face at Northwest.

- How do we in the church get along with each other when we are so different in so many ways?
- How do I walk with God when there are so many tempting distractions?
- What counsel does Paul have for a church - like theirs; like ours - with such great opportunities to serve?
- What advice does he have for struggling families?

As we make our way through this letter, we will freely apply what Paul writes to the Ephesians to ourselves. The letter has stood the test of time. Its truths are timeless and timely.

And, before launching into the meat of the letter, to this young, vibrant church, Paul offers a loving prayer.

Written to Bring Grace and Peace (v. 2)

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

¹⁰ During this season, Paul also wrote Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, collectively called "the prison epistles."

He wants us to thrill to the theme of grace, to embrace grace, to enjoy grace, knowing that when we do, we'll experience God's peace.

This first chapter highlights some of the works of the Father, of the Son, and of the Spirit in winning our salvation.

First, we consider the blessings lavished on us by the Father.

The Blessings of Being in Jesus (vv. 3-14)

Blessings FROM the Father (vv. 3-5)

Every possible blessing (v. 3)

[3] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ¹¹

Usually, when we think of blessing someone, we think of the greater blessing the lesser. A king blesses his subjects. So, the idea of our "blessing" God may sound a little odd.

But Paul means here, "*Praise God!*" We praise and bless God because we have been blessed by God.

Paul says nothing about health and wealth, nothing about making life work out the way we want it to now.

No, he says that there are no spiritual blessings - gifts God might give us that impact our life with Him - that aren't already ours.

Blessings from God include the possibility of personal peace during life's storms. God's blessings include the assurance of a bright eternity. There is access to a deep and abiding joy because we know the Father.

¹¹ Notice that "bless" occurs 3x in this one verse.

The blessing of God's presence will enable you to work through a mid-life crisis. The spiritual blessings of God in our lives means that He can redeem all kinds of messes we might get ourselves into.

Our broader society even benefits from God's blessings as we, His people, become voices for justice and as we infiltrate our city as salt and light.

God's blessings bring benefits on all levels and in all kinds of ways right here and right now.

But Paul looks beyond the here and the now to show us how God's blessings impact our future, as well.

Our destiny (vv. 4-5)

[4] just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love [5a] He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself

This is so rich. Paul gives us two pictures of our destiny.

First, we learn that God the Father has chosen that we who believe in Jesus should be people marked by holiness.

That is your ultimate, eternal destiny and it is God's will for you now. Much of what we will be seeing in this letter Paul writes will direct us to holiness.

Second, the ultimate destiny of all those who believe in Jesus is full adoption as sons (and daughters) of God as the end point of salvation when we enter glory. He has predestined this to be so.¹²

¹² Predestination here does not refer to eternal life, but to our destiny as Christians. God does not lose those He has saved, but predestines them to adoption as sons and daughters of God.

Now, beyond considering the specific "*choosing*" and "*predestinating*" Paul speaks of here, we could ask broader questions about issues that come to mind along these lines. We could consider "election" and "foreknowledge".

These are biblical themes and are worth thinking about. And obviously, sincere, Christ-loving people land at different places on the spectrum of what these terms mean.

So, barging right on in where wise angels fear to tread, I'm choosing to offer up a couple of thoughts about choice.

Choice thoughts about choice...

I'm not, of course, going to answer all the questions you've ever had about God's foreknowledge and I won't finally reconcile the two truths of God's sovereignty and human choice.

I am going to try to say something about this that is true.

#1 - A mystery

First, if Paul can speak of God having chosen a people - Christians - to be holy and blameless before the foundation of the world, that means that He chose people who had not yet been born to believe in a Jesus who also had not yet been born.

Clearly, there is a timeless element in God's nature.

God knows what will happen and He knows how what will happen relates to what He causes AND how all of that relates to decisions made by people like us who are free-will agents.¹³

Got a headache, yet?

¹³ I do not understand Paul to be saying here that God has chosen who will become Christians. He says here that God chose that whoever is in His Son should be holy and blameless. And how does someone arrive at being "*in Him*"? By faith.

It's not a cop-out to say that God's ways are above our ways and that, past a certain point, our finite minds simply can't figure out His inscrutable ways. It's OK to say we're dealing with a mystery here.

#2 - Our choices are real

A second true thing is that both the Bible and life tell us that the choices we make are real choices.

In each scenario we have faced where we made a choice, we could have chosen otherwise. We're responsible for the choices we make, and our choices are not pre-scripted.

#3 - God takes sovereign initiative

A third true thing is that, while we make real choices, God takes sovereign initiative. From the wreckage in the Garden of Eden forward, He has always made the first move toward people.

Just consider some of the steps God takes toward us.

- He placed evidence in creation that points to His existence and to His power. (Psalm 19)
- God gives people an internal sense of right and wrong. We call that "conscience." Conscience can point us to God. (Romans 1 and 2)
- God sent His Son into the world to shine the "**true light**" to God. (John 1:5)
- God's Son gave His life on the cross to bring eternal life to all who believe in Him. (John 3:16)
- The Holy Spirit's present work is to "**convict**" the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. (John 16:8-11)

No one twisted God's arm to take this initiative toward us. He did it out of His own goodness and grace.

#4 - God is a gracious Pursuer

And here is a fourth true thing. Whenever anyone responds positively to an initiative God takes, God will take more initiative with that person and will see to it that he or she receives more "light" to respond to, until they have enough light to believe in Jesus.

God is so gracious. He pursues, He persuades, He prods.

He brings people into our lives to stir us up, allows trials and even temptations that let us to see our need for Him, and then opens our eyes to see the beauty of the cross of Christ.

And He does all of this while never robbing us of the dignity of choice so that when we trust Christ for eternal life, it is not against our will or in spite of our will, it is because we want to trust Christ.

The longer I walk with God, the more clearly I see the passion He has pursued me, how graciously He has sought me, and how intimately He has been involved at every step of my journey.

Yes, the Father has blessed us with every spiritual blessing we could ever need.

But the Son is also deeply involved in bringing us salvation.

Blessings FROM the Son (vv. 7-11)

[7] In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, [8] which He lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight [9] He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him [10] with a view to an administration suitable to the fulness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth. In Him [11] also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will

The picture we are to bring to mind as we think of *redemption* is the picture of the slave market in the ancient world.

Most often *redemption* refers to the practice of paying money to free prisoners of war who had been enslaved following their capture.

The parallel between that and what God has done in the spiritual realm is striking.

A war was fought at the beginning of human history. The human race lost to the temptations of Satan. It was a decisive defeat that has resulted in every man, woman, and child from Adam and Eve forward being a prisoner of war, enslaved to the enemy.

We needed a Champion, Someone who would rescue us from our prison of condemnation.

That “Someone” appeared on the scene two thousand years ago. Jesus offered up His own life as a *ransom* for our deliverance.

And the ransom was paid, NOT to the enemy, but by God the Son to God the Father.

Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross turned the key in our cell’s lock. The door is now wide open for anyone to walk into freedom. Trust in Jesus and you are free from condemnation. Trust in Jesus and you have eternal life.

Finally, the Holy Spirit also plays a key role in our salvation.

Blessings FROM the Spirit (vv. 13-14a)

[13] In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation - having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, [14a] who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession

Tamper-proof bottles are among the current banes of my existence. My most recent frustrating experience was with a bottle of Cholula hot sauce that took way too much time to open.

The tamper-proof era began in 1982 after the deliberate contamination of some Tylenol tablets. Today, with the seals Tylenol uses, you could get and lose a headache while trying to open a bottle.

We seal our medicines because we don’t want anybody messing with them. And we seal envelopes for the same reason. We want our letters to arrive at their destination un-messed with.

The Greeks and Romans had their own document sealing system.

If you sent a letter to a friend in the first century, you would roll up the parchment and seal it shut with hot wax. That seal was not to be broken by anyone except the rightful recipient of the letter.

Paul says that Christians have been “sealed” with the Holy Spirit. This means that nobody and nothing can mess with us as we travel through life on our way to glory.

The Spirit of God validates that we belong to God, guarantees our final salvation and full inheritance.

Every blessing given to us by the Spirit, by the Son, and by the Father is undeserved, and each blessing is just what we need.

But - and this might surprise you - you weren’t saved primarily so that God could lavish blessings on you.

There is a far grander purpose behind all that God does in bringing us to salvation. And that purpose is exposed in plain sight in Ephesians, chapter 1.

At the end of each section dealing with the Father, or the Son, or the Spirit’s work in bringing us eternal life is a repeated phrase.

Blessings TO the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (vv. 5-6, 12, 14)

[5] according to the kind intention of His will, [6] TO THE PRAISE OF THE GLORY OF HIS GRACE, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved...[12] to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be TO THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY...[14] TO THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY.

As great as the blessings we’ve received from God all are, the point of God’s saving us is not us, it’s God; it’s not anthropological, it’s doxological.

Every person's purpose is to glorify God. And we don't work right if we're not giving ourselves to that purpose.

Conclusion:

At the beginning, I made comments about life purpose. We return to that theme here at the end.

As Andy Stanley suggested, if you devote yourself solely to yourself, at the end, all you'll have to show for yourself is yourself.

But, if you devote yourself to something greater than yourself, your life will have purpose and you will find fulfillment.

We are all "means" looking for an "end" worthy of a life commitment. We are tools looking for a transcendent work to which we can give ourselves.

- You are a shovel. Your proper work is to dig deep into your life with God. Pray and worship. Give yourself to knowing and serving the Lord.
- You are glue. Your proper work is to relate lovingly in Jesus' Name. Bring people together under the banner of Christ. Unite in love.
- You are a hammer. Your proper work is to press Jesus into the lives of your friends. Drive home the value of following Jesus.

All the good stuff we long for - personal fulfillment, impact - flows from aligning ourselves with God's purpose.

A church filled with men and women, young people, and boys and girls who are committed to being "means" to God's "end" is becoming the church Jesus died and rose again to create.

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
Praise Him all creatures here below.
Praise Him above - ye heavenly host!
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!*