

## Resurrecting Church: The Greater Story

**Big Idea:** Our story is part of a much greater story.

**Purpose:** To encourage people to live a greater story.

**Passage:** Ephesians 1:1-14

### Opening

#### **The Power of Story**

-There is nothing like a great story. I am an only child so I had more alone time than kids who grew up with brothers and sisters. As a child, I was either playing sports, constructing Legos, or reading. I am so grateful my parents provided me opportunities and resources to become an avid reader at a young age.

In my room I had a tent set up. It was my reading tent. I would rush home from school, grab a snack and disappear into my reading tent where I would become part of incredible stories. I would enter the world of magical wardrobes, hobbits, wizards, dragons or brave men and women who would put their lives on the line so that good would triumph over evil. As I would enter these stories, the line between my life and lives of the characters would often blur. My heart would come alive again and again. ***It was almost like I was meant to be part of something greater.*** Then my mom would call me for dinner and remind me of my chores and homework, and those worlds would disappear until later that night when I would fake going to bed and then crawl back into my reading tent, ninja-like, to reenter the worlds I so longed to be part of. Sorry, Mom and Dad.

-There is nothing like a great story. You know that to be true. The books we read, the movies we watch, the TV shows we bond over are almost all great stories. Brain science reveals that what I experienced as a kid in that tent and what most of us experience when we enter a story is legit. When we read or listen to a story, multiple parts of our brain light up and activate, as opposed to just isolated regions of our brain. Research has also shown that when we read or listen to a storyteller, our brain waves start to sync with the storyteller. The better we listen the more in-sync our brain is with the story. Maybe that is why Jesus communicated mostly through stories. Perhaps that is why He often followed a story by saying, *“Do you have ears to hear?”* It is almost like we were made for great stories.

-There is nothing like a great story. Corrie & I have made lot of mistakes as parents, but we are so grateful both of our girls love to read. Every night since they were very small, we would read to them before bed. That still is the case. I am not sure who enjoys it more. Our girls both devour stacks of books every week, most of them involving great stories.



Over the last decade or so of reading books as a family, one of our all-time favorite series is called *The Wingfeather Saga* by Andrew Peterson. Some of you may know Andrew Peterson as a well-known singer-songwriter. Andrew is also a gifted author. He started by telling his kids stories at night and slowly created a great story. He put that story to paper and his kids helped to illustrate it. What started as a family project eventually became a 4-volume tour-de-force. Our family cannot recommend *The Wingfeather Saga* more highly. Adults, teens, kids will all equally enjoy entering this great story.

**The story revolves around 3 pretty normal kids.** But by the end of the first book there is a big reveal that will forever change their lives. They are not who they thought they were. ***They realize they are part of a much greater story where much is at stake. They realize they play a vital role in the story.*** I remember the moment we realized who the kids really were and what they were called to be part of. We all had huge grins on our faces. ***It was almost like something in our hearts was telling us what was true of those three kids was true of us.***



**I believe that is exactly what Paul's letter to the Ephesians is telling us.**

### Context

-Today we begin a 11-week series called *Resurrecting Church*. Hannah told you last week that I loved long series. Ephesians is such a wonderful book—I want to make sure we get the most out of it.

-Every pastor I know is deeply wrestling with the current state of the church. Over this last year I have had moments where I have never been more disappointed in the church. But I have also felt that there has never been a season my lifetime where the church was needed more. There is no Plan B. The church as the body of Christ is the hope of the world. There are raging conversations about the state of the church in America. These are important conversations. At the end of the day, my primary responsibility is to help our expression of the church to be the Church God wants it to be in our local context. That pursuit must be grounded in Scripture. And Paul's letter to the Ephesians is our best guide.

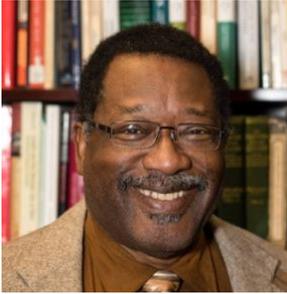
-Paul wrote what we refer to as the letter to the Ephesians some time during his Roman imprisonment in A.D. 60-62. Ephesians is Paul's only letter which is not written to address specific issues in a local church. There is none of that in this letter. In fact, if you look at verse one of the letter, you will notice that there is a footnote attached to the phrase *in Ephesus*. The phrase *in Ephesus* is not included in our earliest and best manuscripts. It was added later.

Many scholars do not think Paul wrote the letter directly to the church in Ephesus, but perhaps it landed there first since Ephesus was a prominent church in the region. It is likely that Paul wrote this letter to all the churches in the region. It was meant to be circulated—the letter was for all the churches. It is a letter that paints a picture of what the church is meant to be. Its message was just as vital for the church at Ephesus, the

church at Corinth, the church at Rome, etc., as it is for the church at New Hope. When we lose our way as a church, Ephesians reminds us who we are meant to be. Ephesians invites us into a greater story.

### Resources for Series

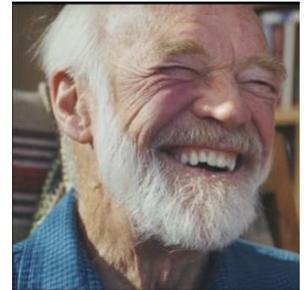
-I thought it would be helpful to share the primary resources our teaching team will be using throughout the series. We will be using two scholarly commentaries. The first is by **Dr. Lynn Cohick**. She is actually the Dean of Northern Seminary where I am pursuing my doctorate. Lynn's commentary is the newest comprehensive commentary available on Ephesians.



We will also be using a commentary by **Dr. Thomas Slater**. Unless you are a serious student of the Bible, I wouldn't recommend buy those commentaries. They are not cheap.



But I would recommend buying one of the two books we will also use to guide us. The first is called [\*Practice Resurrection\*](#) by **Eugene Peterson**. This is the one of the last books Eugene wrote. It is most excellent.



The second book is called [\*The Drama of Ephesians\*](#) by **Dr. Timothy Gombis**. That book was very helpful in framing today's message. **I will interview Dr. Gombis in the final week of the series.**

### Context for passage

-Our reading today is Ephesians 1:1-14. Feel free to follow along in your Bibles. After the reading, I will frame up the letter for us and lay out some of the key ideas we will explore of the next few months. You will note that the first two verses are a general greeting. We can put *in Ephesus* in parenthesis. Verses 3-14 are one long sentence in the Greek. It consists of 202 words, and is the second longest sentence in the New Testament. Most scholars believe the long sentence in verses 3-14 operates as an opening benediction. Some have even argued it was a hymn of sorts. I think it operates more like a prologue. It sets the stage for the story we are about to enter.

### **Public Reading – Ephesians 1:1-14**

*-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.*

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the*

*world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.*

*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he 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.*

*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, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*

*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.*

### **Key Ideas for Series**

#### **Our story is part of a much greater story**

-Dr. Tim Gombis, whom I will interview at the end of the series, really opened my eyes to a new way to read Ephesians. I grew up reading Ephesians and hearing Ephesians taught as a list of theological statements. Paul makes profound theological statements in the letter. But we miss his point if we read the letter as a set of statements to learn about God.

Tim argues that Ephesians must be read as **a story**. I agree with him. Tim describes Ephesians as, ‘*a drama in which Paul portrays the powerful, reality-altering, cosmos-transforming acts of God in Christ to redeem God’s world and save God’s people, for the glory of his name.*’ We must not read Ephesians as students looking to learn theology. **We must read it as participants invited to enter a story.** Tim goes on, ‘*Ephesians, then, is a drama, portraying the victory of God in Christ over the dark powers that rule this present evil age, and the letter becomes a script for how God’s people can continue, by the power of the Spirit, to perform the drama called the triumph of God in Christ.*’

-We can sum it up this way: ***Our story is part of a much greater story.*** We see this in the prologue that was just read. In verse 4, Paul talks about the fact that the *church was chosen before the foundations of the world.* That is the beginning of the great story. In verse 9, Paul talks about the day when *all things will reach their fulfillment – when heaven and earth will once again come together.* That is the end of the greater story. We are situated somewhere between the beginning and the end of the greater story.

-We should read Ephesians as a great story. Tim also argues that we should read it as an apocalyptic story. Again, I think he is right. When we hear the word *apocalypse*, we think of the end of the world. But that is not what apocalypse means in the Biblical sense. The word ***apocalypse*** simply means ***revelation***. An apocalypse reveals something. There are many different genres in Scripture. One of those genres is apocalyptic literature. Don’t glaze over. This is really important stuff. Typical examples of apocalyptic literature are the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of Daniel, parts of Ezekiel and much of John’s Revelation.

-Apocalyptic literature usually emerged during times of great crisis for God's people. In those times, a tension arose between who God's people were called to be and what they were presently enduring. Apocalyptic literature relieved some of that tension by revealing something that had not yet been revealed.

An example is found in 2 Kings 6. Elisha's servant awoke one morning to find their city surrounding by an enemy bent on their destruction. Our world has felt a bit like that lately. The servant is freaked out. Elisha the prophet awakes to the same scene, stretches, yawns and makes his morning coffee. He is unconcerned. Why? Elisha sees something the servant doesn't see. Elijah simply prays, '*Lord open his eyes.*'

When the servant's eyes were opened, he saw the armies of the LORD on every hill. That is *apocalypse*. ***Something new was revealed that gave greater perspective to present reality.*** Ephesians does just that. To view Ephesians as an apocalyptic story does not mean it is filled with crazy looking creatures and end times prophecies. It simply means that it is revealing things that have not previously been revealed. In this case Paul is revealing God's purpose and plan for the church.

-We see this in the prologue that was read. Paul tells the 1<sup>st</sup> century churches that they were the first to put their hope in Jesus—so God has revealed to them the *mystery of his will*. In chapter 4, Paul mentions *mystery* 4 times and triumphantly declares that the *mystery that has been hidden in God from everyone, even heavenly beings, is now revealed in and through Jesus and the church*. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the missing puzzle piece that completes the whole picture. We can look back and understand. We can look forward in hope for what will surely take place. A mystery has been solved.

-Ephesians is inviting us into a greater story that gives us a new perspective on reality. *Paul wants us to look at things from a heavenly perspective*. This is why one of the first lines of the prologue states that *we are blessed in the heavenly realms with everything we need in Jesus*. And like the scene in 2 Kings, we are undoubtedly in a battle. Paul pulls no punches in the last chapter of the letter when he declares, '*This is no weekend war that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.*' (Ephesians 6:12, *The Message*)

We are prone to be like Elisha's servant looking at the enemy on every side and wringing our hands. In desperate times when evil seems to be prevailing and the church is limping along, hope can appear to be a cruel joke. *Ephesians reveals the army of God on every hill*.

Ephesians reminds us that all will be well. Ephesians invites us into the greater story of making all things well. Paul wants the greater story of Ephesians to be the frame through which we view God, ourselves, others and the world. In doing so, we will become the church we are meant to be. Our story is part of a much greater story.

### **God is the showrunner of the greater story**

-***Not only is our story part of a much greater story, but Ephesians reveals God is the showrunner of the greater story.*** The last decade has been called the ***Golden Age of Television***. Television has surpassed movies as the dominant form of entertainment. Most TV shows, especially ones that involve multiple seasons, have a *showrunner*. The showrunner is responsible for the overall direction of the show. The showrunner oversees the writing, the producing, the direction, the cinematography, the score. The showrunner knows exactly in season one where the show is meant to end many seasons down the line.

-God is the showrunner of this greater story of which we are part. This is on full display in the prologue. Paul uses 7 verbs that hold the prologue together. One commentator calls them **verbal rockets**.

### 7 Verbal Rockets:

- 1. **Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ** (v. 3): This verb means good-word or good news. Paul tells us that the God who is blessed, or full of good news, has good-newsed the church. *We are people of the good news.*
- 2. **For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight** (v. 4): There is no greater indignity than being left out and not chosen. There is no greater affirmation than being chosen for something. *The church was chosen and set apart before the foundation of the world. The church isn't chosen due to performance, but due to grace.*
- 3. **He destined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ** (v. 5a): We have a destiny that is certain. This verb means *boundary lines*. It reminded me of Psalm 16:5-6. *Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.* (Psalm 16:5-6)
- 4. **to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves** (v. 6). The Greek word means *bestowed*. It is super rare. It is used when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and declares her to be the favored one. The word essentially makes grace a verb. **We are *graced* with grace.**
- 5. **In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us** (v. 7a): In case we didn't get the point, Paul emphasizes it. **God has lavished us with grace.** This is one of Paul's favorite words. He uses it almost 40 times. It means above and beyond. If we ever think we are beyond God's grace, we are wrong.
- 6. **He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ,** (v. 9): Back to the mystery being revealed—Think how honored you feel when someone entrusts you with a secret. We are no longer in the dark. We are in God's inner circle. God is whispering his secrets in our ears.
- 7. **to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.** (v. 10b): This verb means to **gather up**. The Church is the place where God's long-awaited plan is made known, actualized and fulfilled. We are in the very center of the action.

-Our story is part of a greater story. But we don't have to run the show. God is the showrunner. **God blesses, chooses, destines, bestows, lavishes, makes known and gathers up.** The church is where the action happens, but the story is not about what we do, the story is about what God does. Three times in the prologue, Paul reminds us that the greater story is *to the praise of God's glory*. It is not our story. We are invited to participate in God's story. God is the showrunner.

### Jesus is the lead actor

-If God is the showrunner, **Jesus is the lead actor**. If we doubt it, then we just need to look back to the prologue:

*-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.*

*Praise be to the God and Father of our **Lord Jesus Christ**, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing **in Christ**.*

*For he chose us **in him** before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship **through Jesus Christ**, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us **in the One** he loves.*

***In him** we have redemption through **his blood**, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he 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**.*

***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, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope **in Christ**, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included **in Christ** when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.*

*When you believed, you were marked **in him** with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:1-14)*

-Paul will reveal in the letter that Jesus is the head of the church. We, the church, are the body of Christ. Everything, absolutely everything, flows from Jesus. That is why our mission at New Hope is to...*follow Jesus and share his love*. Everything we do is oriented around Jesus. That is what we do communion every Sunday. If in our worship and in our teaching, we somehow wander from Jesus, the Table brings us back to Jesus. The brilliant and brave scholar-martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer was once asked how to determine a good church from a bad church. Bonhoeffer answered, "*Just listen for how often they talk about Jesus and what they say.*" We will be reminded again and again in Ephesians that Jesus is the lead actor of the greater story.

### **We are meant to play a vital role in the story**

-God is the showrunner. Jesus is the lead actor. Where do we fit in? That is a primary focus of Ephesians. *We are meant to play a vital role in the story.*

First, notice I said **we**. Ephesians is not written to an individual. Ephesians is written to churches or communities of Jesus followers. Paul addresses the letter to the *holy people in Ephesus* and the other churches, not 'the holy person.' Paul then writes '*grace and peace to **you**.*' When we see the word *you* in the New Testament, it is often plural. We just don't have a word in the English language that works. Our friends down south have tried. They say *y'all*. Maybe it would help you to read it that way: '*grace and peace to **y'all**.*'

It is challenging to find the singular in Ephesians. Almost everything is plural. The prologue is filled with *we* and *us*. Because we are so committed to individualism, we read the Bible through this lens of singleness. And it is tragic. Following Jesus is not a solo sport. It is a team sport. We cannot follow Jesus alone. ***We follow Jesus as a community.*** Our vital role in the greater story is a group effort.

-Every summer we lived in Madison, we would go several times to an outdoor Shakespearean Theater called *American Player's Theater*. It was a magical place for Corrie and me. It was the location of our first date—although Corrie claims we were just friends at the time. I knew better.



I didn't grow up going to much theater and APT is high level theater. Many of the actors have performed on Broadway and in major movies. It was always a marvel to behold. What is undeniable is that it was a team effort. To pull off a successful show involved hundreds of people faithfully performing their roles. You had the director, the producer, the writer, the main actors, the actors who played small roles, the understudies, sound people, light people, ushers, hospitality folks, people working concessions. In the theater world, the team of people involved in a play is called a *troupe*. A more modern word is *ensemble*. The greater story Paul reveals in Ephesians involves an ensemble. For the great story to happen, we all have a vital role to play.

-This is evidenced in how Paul's letter is organized. The first part of the letter, chapters 1-3, are devoted primarily to what God, the showrunner, and Jesus, the lead actor, have accomplished. The second part of the letter, chapters 4-6, is devoted to how the church is meant to live out the greater story. We have a vital role to play. Paul devotes just as much space to our role as he does to God's role.

We see this transition clearly in chapter 4, verse 1. Paul writes, "*I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...*" (Ephesians 4:1) The word *therefore* points us backward to everything he has revealed. Paul is telling us that we need to live in light of everything God has done for us in Jesus. What we know should be reflected in how we live. Paul uses this word *therefore* nine times in the second part of the letter. **What God has done for us in Jesus must always lead to a new way of living.** Paul is not making a casual suggestion. Paul begs the church to not have knowledge in our heads that is not reflected in our lives.

-Paul tells us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling. The Greek word translated *worthy* is *axios* from which we get our word axis. *Axios* is a word about the balancing of scales. Paul's letter is perfectly balanced between the knowing and the living. If we **know** and don't **live**, we are out of balance. We aren't just meant to know the greater story to which we have been called. We are meant to live it out because we have a vital role to play.

-A recent Gallup poll revealed the startling fact that only 47% of Americans now considered themselves connected to a church. It is the first time in 8 decades of Gallup polling that that percentage has dipped below 50%. In 1999 that number was 70%. In the last twenty years, 20% of Americans have walked away from church. Even more troubling is the fact that only 36% of millennials now go to church. There have been countless articles and blogs and podcasts about why this trend is occurring. It is an important and complex conversation. There certainly is not just one reason for this trend. But I think there are primary reasons.

-Russell Moore, a prominent American theologian and thought leader, just addressed one in a recent article. Essentially, Moore argues that there was a large group of church goers in America who were nominal Christians. Many of them have left the church. This is not to be celebrated but expected, as the way of Jesus is not for the faint of heart. But Moore is deeply troubled by the growing trend of previously committed followers of Jesus leaving the church. **Moore concludes that this group of people is walking away not because they do not believe what the church teaches but because they do not think the church believes what the church is teaching.** Moore concludes, *“We are losing a generation—not because **they** are secularists, but because they believe **we** are.*

I think he is spot-on. To use Paul’s vernacular, *we have gotten out of balance.* The church preaches and teaches a great story—but often doesn’t live it out. A generation who has seen scandal after scandal from their church leaders and has seen the church selling its soul to things other than the Kingdom of God is done with the hypocrisy. They are walking away from church not because they don’t believe in the greater story—they are walking away because *they don’t think the church believes in the greater story* because it is not evidenced in our daily lives. As Brennan Manning rightly said decades ago, *“The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.*

-Please hear this – the church will be fine. The church is undefeated. The gates of hell will not prevail against the church. But if we do not begin to live out the greater story, we may lose multiple generations. I am committed to not having that happen on our watch.

Ephesians provides the answer. Paul tells us we are the body of Jesus. We are the hands and feet of Jesus meant to live out the greater story in our present context. In Ephesians 2, Paul declares that *‘we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works that we might walk in them.’* Ephesians reminds us that our story is part of a much greater story. And we are not just to know that story and tell that story. We are meant to live that story. We are committed to being that type of church at New Hope.

## Closing

### **There is nothing like a great story**

-Brain science reveals that great stories change the way we think and live. Research shows stories are much more effective at changing thinking and behavior than just being told to think and live differently. Both J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis knew this. They are best known for their stories. And yet during the day, they were both professors at Oxford. Each of them was a world-renowned expert in his fields. They took a lot of flak for spending so much of their time writing stories. And yet as followers of Jesus, they believed the most effective way to communicate the good news was through story. They believed the story we are all part of is so great it could only be captured by other great stories. I couldn’t agree with them more. That is why I am always reading works of fiction.

-As a young kid reading in my tent, my heart about leapt out of my chest when it was revealed that Strider was Aragorn the 2<sup>nd</sup>, son of Arathorn the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the King of Kings of Middle Earth. I began to imagine my life differently when Frodo, who lived a remarkable boring life in the Shire, became the Ringbearer. My categories were busted when princess Eowyn dressed as a man to enter the battlefield and slew the Lord of the Nazgul. The same thing happened when a group of kids wandered through the back of a wardrobe and became kings and queens, princes and princesses, locked in an epic battle between good and evil. Something in my young

heart told me their story was our story. I see the same things happening in the hearts of our girls as they enter great stories.

-Here is the sad truth— some of us, if not most of us, live lesser stories. They aren't bad stories. They are just lesser stories. Ephesians calls us out of our lesser stories into a greater story, the story we were created and called to live. Over the next 11 weeks, Paul's letter to the Ephesians will remind us again and again of that reality.

-I want to give you a homework assignment for this week. This is for adults, teens and kids. Families, you can do it together if you want. Find 30 minutes in your schedule and read or listen to Paul's letter to the Ephesians. I encourage you to use Eugene Peterson's translation called *The Message*. As you read or listen to it, remember that our story is part of a much greater story. And we aren't just supposed to read this story and know this story. We are supposed to **live** this story.