

This Great Mystery

Ephesians and the Secret God Kept for Ages

Session 2. The Fullness of Him Who Fills All

Reading: Ephesians 1:15-23

Part One

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

The group traces Paul's one-sentence prayer all the way to its landing point and discovers that it climaxes not in Christ alone but in the Church as his body, and then has to ask what that makes the Church.

Catholic Touchstone

Christ the head and the Church his body form one living whole, so that the Church is not an audience gathered around Christ but the body through which the enthroned Lord fills the world.

Last week the group traced the Father-Son-Spirit shape of the opening blessing and met the word mystery. Tonight Paul stops blessing and starts praying, and his prayer is strange: he asks for nothing except that the Ephesians would see what they already have. The prayer rises through resurrection and enthronement, borrowing its biggest lines from two psalms the group will find for themselves, and then lands somewhere no one expects: on the Church. Your job tonight is mostly to slow the group down enough that the last four words of the chapter can shock them properly.

What You Need to Know

One sentence, one landing point

In Greek, verses 15 to 23 are a single sentence. Paul piles clause on clause, thanksgiving into petition into a meditation on power, and the whole structure comes down to land on the words the church, which is his body. The inductive payoff of the night is simply noticing where the sentence ends. Resist the urge to announce this; question 6 is built to let them find it.

Paul prays for eyes, not for stuff

Notice what Paul does not ask for: no protection, no growth, no funds, no healing. He asks that God give them a spirit of wisdom and of revelation, and that the eyes of their hearts be enlightened. In 1:3 they already possess every spiritual blessing; the prayer is that they would perceive it. A modern image you can use, marked as ours: eyes adjusting in a dim room. The furniture was there before you could see it.

Whose inheritance is verse 18?

In 1:14 the Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance. In 1:18 Paul prays they would know the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. The Greek genitive can be read two ways: the inheritance God gives, enjoyed among the saints, or the saints themselves as God's own inheritance. Both readings have serious defenders and the Church has not settled the grammar, so hold it with open hands. The second reading has deep Old Testament roots (Deuteronomy 32:9, the LORD's portion is

his people) and makes the possession run both ways: he is our inheritance, and astonishingly, we are his.

Two psalms under the floorboards

Verse 20 (made him sit at his right hand) is Psalm 110:1. Verse 22 (put all things under his feet) is Psalm 8:6. The discovery moment at question 5 sends the group to find both, so do not read these references aloud beforehand. Psalm 110 is a royal enthronement psalm addressed to the king; Psalm 8 is about mankind, the son of man crowned with glory and given dominion over the works of God's hands. Paul reads Jesus as both the enthroned King and the true Man in whom humanity's lost dominion is finally exercised. Psalm 110:1 is often reckoned the Old Testament verse most quoted and echoed in the New Testament; if you use that claim, keep the hedge.

The *plērōma* question, honestly

Verse 23 calls the Church the fulness of him who fills all in all. The Greek *plērōma* (fullness) and the participle behind fills have been argued over for centuries. The strong reading, which St. John Chrysostom takes in his homilies on this letter, sets the fulness in apposition to his body: the Church is, by Christ's own gracious choice, the completion of the head, as a body completes a head. Other careful readers, including Catholic ones, take the fulness as describing Christ himself, who is filled by God and who fills the Church. The Church has not defined the grammar. The steelman at question 7 works either way, because even the minimal reading leaves verse 22 intact: the ruler of the cosmos is given to the Church.

- Do not present the strong reading as dogma; present it as the reading much of the tradition has loved, and say plainly that the grammar is disputed.
- Whatever *plērōma* means, the Church's glory in this passage is entirely derived. A body has no life except from its head. That answers the worry that this exalts an institution to a divine height.

The list in verse 21

Rule, authority, power, dominion: Paul names the spiritual powers deliberately, and he is not done with them in this letter. Do not explain them tonight. Just make sure the list gets read aloud clearly; it is a seed you are planting.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalm 110: the coronation

The LORD says to my lord: Sit at my right hand. A psalm of David about a king greater than David, sung for a thousand years before anyone sat down. The apostles reached for this psalm constantly, following Jesus' own use of it. Paul's claim in verse 20 is that the empty seat is now occupied.

Psalm 8: the dominion of man

Psalm 8 marvels that God has crowned man with glory and honor and put all things under his feet, echoing Adam's commission in Genesis 1:26-28. Humanity never lived up to it. Hebrews 2:8-9 states the problem exactly: we do not yet see everything in subjection to him, but we see Jesus. Paul makes the same move in verse 22 and in 1 Corinthians 15:25-27, stitching Psalm 110 and Psalm 8 together. The dominion Adam fumbled is exercised by the new Adam, and his body shares it.

Israel as the LORD's portion

Deuteronomy 32:9: For the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. If verse 18 means the saints are God's inheritance, this is its taproot. God's treasured possession was never land or gold; it was a people.

Glory filling the house (leader background only)

The phrase fills all in all may carry an echo of the glory cloud filling the tabernacle and temple (1 Kings 8:10-11; Ezekiel 43:5). Hold this lightly and privately: it is suggestive rather than certain, and if it is right, it points toward a discovery the group will make for themselves in session 4. Do not hand it out tonight.

Voices of the Church

Read these aloud where they land. Each is either a direct citation or an honest summary, labelled as such.

St. Augustine of Hippo, d. 430

Augustine returns again and again to what he calls the whole Christ, the totus Christus: Christ the head and the Church his body are so joined that they form, in a real sense, one Christ. When the Church prays the Psalms, he teaches in substance, it is Christ praying in his members; when the head was raised and enthroned, the body received its own destiny in him. Christ, having bound himself to us, does not will to be spoken of without his body.

Enarrationes in Psalmos (his expositions of the Psalms), a theme running throughout. Summary of St. Augustine of Hippo's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. For anyone in the room who thinks of the Church as an optional extra bolted onto a personal Jesus, Augustine says gently: you have not yet met the whole Christ.

St. Leo the Great, d. 461

Preaching on the Ascension, Leo teaches in substance that Christ's going up was not a going away: what was visible of our Redeemer has passed over into the sacraments. The enthronement Paul describes in Ephesians 1:20 did not put Christ out of reach; it changed the mode of his presence, so that the King seated far above every power now reaches and feeds his body on earth through the mysteries the Church celebrates.

Sermons on the Ascension. Summary of St. Leo the Great's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. This is why the exalted Christ of tonight's passage is not a distant Christ. The right hand of the Father and the parish altar are connected by his own design.

St. Joan of Arc, d. 1431

On trial for her life, pressed by her judges about her submission to the Church, the nineteen-year-old Joan answered, in substance, that about Jesus Christ and the Church she simply knew they were one thing, and that there was no need to make a difficulty of it.

Acts of her trial (1431), quoted at CCC 795. Summary of St. Joan of Arc's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. A teenager facing execution compressed tonight's entire passage into one sentence. For a generation told to like Jesus and distrust the Church, her answer refuses the split.

Catechism Connection

The Catechism says

CCC 669. As Lord, Christ is also head of the Church, which is his Body; already reigning, he exercises that reign through her even now.

CCC 792. Christ is the head of this Body, the Church; he is the principle of her life and growth.

CCC 795. Christ and the Church together make up the whole Christ, the *totus Christus*; the paragraph gathers Augustine's teaching and St. Joan of Arc's trial answer to say it.

CCC 830. The Church is catholic because Christ is present in her: in her subsists the fullness of Christ's body united with its head, and the fullness of the means of salvation.

Thread Watch

Thread Watch

The mystery (develop). The word does not appear tonight, but fills all in all rhymes with 1:10, where the plan of the mystery was to unite all things in Christ. If someone in the group connects the two, praise the ear and leave it unresolved. The sealed guesses do not open until session 9. Do not define anything.

In Christ, in him, in the Beloved (develop). The power was accomplished in Christ (v. 20), and Paul immediately draws the body into what happened to the head. Keep the phrase in the group's ears; it is doing more work each week.

Inheritance and possession (develop). Last week: we have an inheritance (1:14). Tonight, in verse 18, the possession may run the other way: God's inheritance is in the saints. Question 3 develops this. Let the two-way possession stand as a wonder, not a solved puzzle.

Head and body (plant). The pairing appears tonight for the first time. Plant it lightly; it bears its full weight in session 9, where it will collide with the sealed guesses. Do not look ahead out loud.

The powers (plant). The list in verse 21 (rule, authority, power, dominion) returns at 3:10 and again at 6:12. Tonight, just make sure it gets read aloud clearly and noticed. Explain nothing.

Objection Bench

Leader only. Do not raise these unless someone in the room does.

Isn't 'the church' here just shorthand for all true believers everywhere, with nothing to do with any concrete community or structure?

Tonight, answer lightly: Paul is writing to actual congregations of actual people whose names he knows, and everything he says in this letter he says to them, not over their heads to an abstraction. Do not import chapter 4's material early; the group will discover the structured shape of this unity in session 6. If pressed, say honestly that the question is a good one and the letter itself will answer it.

If Christ fills all in all, why does the world look so unfilled? War, cancer, my own life on a bad Tuesday.

Hebrews 2:8 gives the apostolic answer in one line: as it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. The enthronement is real and present; the visible pacification of the territory is still under way. The Church lives in the gap between the coronation and the full arrival of the reign, which is exactly why Paul prays for eyes that can see what is already true.

Doesn't calling the Church Christ's fullness end up with Catholics worshipping the Church?

The passage itself blocks that road. Everything the Church is, she is as a body, and a body has no life except from its head. Her glory in this passage is entirely derived, one hundred percent gift. The Church adores Christ; she does not adore herself. That is precisely what the body image protects.

Session Goals

1. The group traces the single sentence of Ephesians 1:15-23 to its landing point and feels the surprise that the landing point is the Church.
2. They find Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 8:6 underneath Paul's words for themselves, with their own Bibles open.
3. They wrestle honestly with what the fulness of him who fills all in all can and cannot mean, and hear the steelman at full strength before it is answered.
4. They leave carrying Paul's prayer as something they can actually pray for a named person this week.

Time Note

Planned for 75 to 90 minutes

Roughly: opening prayer and Win, 12 minutes; reading, 5; Build questions 1 to 4, 20; the discovery at question 5, 12; questions 6 and 7 including the steelman, 20; questions 8 and 9, 10; Send, Live It This Week, memory verse and closing prayer, 12. That fills 90 minutes; for a 75-minute room, apply the first cut below in advance.

If you are running long, cut in this order.

1. Cut question 3 (the inheritance grammar) first; the inheritance thread returns later in the study and loses nothing.
2. Then cut the Dig Deeper boxes.
3. Then fold question 8 into question 9 and ask them as one question.
4. Never cut the discovery at question 5 or the steelman at question 7; they are the spine of the night.

Part Two

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Pray together

Father of glory, you raised your Son from the dead and seated him at your right hand, far above every power that frightens us. Give us tonight a spirit of wisdom and of revelation. Open the eyes of our hearts, so that we can see what you have already given us, and what you have made us to be. We ask it through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

Open questions. No wrong answers. Let everyone speak before you move on.

W1. What is something you joined, a team, a job, a family tradition, that turned out to matter far more than you expected when you signed up?

W2. When someone tells you 'I'll pray for you,' what do you honestly imagine them asking God for?

Take both questions unhurried; the second one quietly sets up the surprise of verses 16 to 19, so do not comment on the connection yet.

Read

Read aloud

Two readers: verses 15 to 19, then verses 20 to 23. Before they start, tell the group that in Greek this whole passage is one single sentence, and ask them to listen for where the sentence finally lands. Read slowly, especially the last verse.

Build

Numbered inductive questions. Ask, wait, let the group work the text. The ANSWER boxes are for you to share after the discussion, not before it.

The prayer Paul actually prays

1. What two things has Paul heard about the Ephesians in verse 15, and what has hearing it made him do?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

He has heard of their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love toward all the saints, and the pair matters: faith aimed at Christ and love aimed at his people travel together in Paul, never one without the other. And what he does is thank God for them without ceasing and keep them in his prayers. Notice the direction of the gratitude: he does not congratulate the Ephesians, he thanks God, because in chapter 1 everything good in them started with God.

2. Look carefully at verses 16 to 19 and list everything Paul actually asks God to give them. What is missing from the list that you would expect in a prayer for a church?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. If the group stalls, ask: is Paul praying that God would give them more, or that they would see what they have?

Depth. Ask what it would do to a friendship, or a parish, if this became the default way we prayed for each other.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

He asks for a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of God, for the eyes of their hearts to be enlightened, and for them to know three things: the hope of his calling, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of his power toward believers. Missing: everything we usually pray for. No protection, no health, no growth, no money. Paul asks for nothing new to be given, because in verse 3 they already have every spiritual blessing. He prays for perception, like eyes adjusting in a dim room: the furniture was already there before you could see it.

3. Verse 18 speaks of the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. Last week we read that we have an inheritance (1:14). Read verse 18 slowly. Whose inheritance is this one?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Read it twice and the ambiguity appears: it could mean the inheritance God gives us, enjoyed among the saints, or it could mean that the saints themselves are God's inheritance, his own treasured possession. The grammar honestly allows both, and good readers ancient and modern have taken each side, so we hold it with open hands. But the second reading has deep roots: Deuteronomy 32:9 says the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. Either way, both things are true somewhere in Scripture, and the wonder stands: the possession runs in both directions. He is our inheritance, and we are his.

Dig Deeper

Look up Deuteronomy 32:9 and 1 Peter 2:9. What did God consider his treasure long before he owned any temple made of stone?

4. According to verses 19 and 20, where has the power Paul wants them to know already been put on public display, and who is that power 'in us' for?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The power was accomplished in Christ when God raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places. That is Paul's unit of measurement. When he says immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, the yardstick for what God is willing to do in an ordinary believer is not self-improvement; it is resurrection and enthronement. The same working, the same might, aimed at us.

Paul's open Bible

Live discovery

Split into two groups. Group one, look up Psalm 110:1. Group two, look up Psalm 8:4-6. Each group: find the exact phrase Paul borrows, then report back who your psalm is originally about.

Let them find it. Psalm 110:1; Psalm 8:4-6

5. Paul did not make up the two biggest phrases in verses 20 and 22. He is quoting. Let's find what he had open on his desk.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Verse 20, made him sit at his right hand, comes from Psalm 110:1, a coronation psalm in which the LORD tells David's lord to sit at his right hand, sung for centuries about a king greater than David while the seat stayed empty. Verse 22, put all things under his feet, comes from Psalm 8:6, which is not about a king at all: it is about mankind, the son of man crowned with glory and given dominion over the works of God's hands, echoing Adam's commission. So Paul is claiming two things at once: Jesus is the enthroned King the psalm waited for, and Jesus is the true Man in whom humanity's fumbled dominion is finally exercised. Psalm 110:1 is often reckoned the Old Testament verse the New Testament quotes and echoes more than any other; the apostles reached for it constantly because Jesus himself did.

Dig Deeper

Hebrews 2:6-9 and 1 Corinthians 15:25-27 stitch these same two psalms together the same way. Someone taught the apostles to read them as a pair. Who do you suppose that was?

Where the sentence lands

6. Remember, verses 15 to 23 are one long sentence. Trace it out loud to its final words. After resurrection, enthronement, and every power put under his feet, where does this enormous sentence actually come down and land?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

It lands on the Church. Not on Christ's exaltation as the endpoint, but on: head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all. The climax of the most cosmic sentence Paul ever wrote is a roomful of ordinary baptized people. Let the group sit in that for a moment before anyone explains it. The prayer that began with the eyes of their hearts ends by telling them what they are looking at when they look at each other.

7. Verse 23 calls the Church the fulness of Christ. That is an enormous claim, and thoughtful Christians have pushed back hard on it. Let's hear the pushback at full strength before we answer it.

Build then press

The strongest form of the objection. Colossians 2:9 says that in Christ the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily. Christ lacks nothing and needs no completing; to say the Church fills anything out in him borders on blasphemy. So verse 23 must mean only that Christ fills the Church, and 'church' here should mean the invisible

total of all true believers across time, not any visible body. Because look at visible churches: the ones Paul wrote to were compromised and quarrelling, and ours carry scandals we all know about. To call any visible institution the fullness of Christ is to inflate a human organization to a height only God should occupy.

Answering from the text. Take it seriously; it is protecting something true. But notice, first, that Paul wrote Colossians too, and saw no contradiction: the Christ in whom all fullness dwells is the same Christ who, by sheer grace, has chosen not to be complete without his members, the way a head is not a whole man without a body. Second, the grammar of verse 23 most naturally sets the fulness beside his body, and much of the tradition, St. John Chrysostom included, has read it that way with joy rather than embarrassment. Third, the idolatry worry answers itself inside the image: a body has no life except from its head, so everything the Church is here is derived, gift from top to bottom. And fourth, the messiness objection was fully visible from Paul's desk. He says this about real congregations he is about to spend three chapters correcting. The Church's wounds were never a secret from the one who called her his body. Now, honest footnote: some careful readers, including Catholic ones, do take the fulness as describing Christ rather than the Church, and the Church has never defined the grammar. But even that minimal reading leaves verse 22 standing untouched, and verse 22 is already astonishing enough: the ruler of the cosmos, given to the Church.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The objection rightly protects Christ's completeness, and Colossians 2:9 stands: he lacks nothing in himself. But the same Paul teaches that Christ has freely bound himself to his body, and a head does not go anywhere without its body. The Church's glory in verse 23 is entirely derived, which is exactly why it is not idolatry, and Paul says it about visibly messy congregations, which is exactly why our scandals do not refute it. Where the Greek is genuinely disputed, we say so honestly; where verse 22 is not disputed at all, we let it astonish us.

8. Read verse 22 once more, slowly: God has made him the head over all things for the church. In that verse, who is being given to whom?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The direction of the gift is the shock. The exalted Christ, ruler over every power in this age and the next, is given to the Church. She is not a fan club he acquired; she is the one for whose sake he rules everything. From heaven's angle, God's governance of the entire cosmos has an address, and the address is his people. Whatever else the Church is, she is what all of it is for.

Dig Deeper

Go back to the list in verse 21: rule, authority, power, dominion. Paul names them very deliberately. Keep a bookmark here; he is not finished with those names in this letter.

9. Put verses 22 and 23 next to how you actually, honestly think about the Church, or about your own parish on an ordinary Sunday. If Paul is telling the truth, what is the Church? And what can she therefore never be?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

If Paul is right, the Church is Christ's own body, joined to the enthroned head, the fulness of him who fills all in all. She can therefore never be merely a religious service provider, an audience for a message, a club of the like-

minded, or an optional accessory to a private Jesus. You cannot understand her apart from him, and, by his own free choice, you cannot have him apart from her. That includes the parish with the bad music and the people who annoy you. Paul's prayer is that the eyes of our hearts adjust until we can see it.

Send

Open questions. Let these land in silence if they need to.

S1. If the Church really is what Paul just said, what changes about how you walk into Mass this Sunday?

S2. Who is one person you could pray this exact prayer for this week, by name?

Live It This Week

Practices

1. Pray Ephesians 1:17-19 once a day this week for one person, by name, putting their name where the pronouns go. Do not add requests; pray only that they would see.
2. At Mass this Sunday, at the sign of peace or on the way back from Communion, look at the actual people around you and say silently: his body.
3. Write Psalm 110:1 on a card or a phone note and read it once a day. You now know why the apostles reached for that verse so often.

Scripture Memory

Ephesians 1:22-23

"and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all."

Ephesians 1:22-23

Closing Prayer

Pray together

Lord Jesus Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father, far above every power: thank you that you did not choose to be complete without us. Open the eyes of our hearts a little wider this week. Teach us to see your body in the people beside us, and to live as members of it. To you, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be glory in the Church, now and for ever. Amen.

Part Three

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order. Print this page and keep it in front of you.

Primary text

- **Ephesians 1:15-23** one sentence in Greek; read in two parts, 15-19 and 20-23

Discovery passages (do not reveal in advance)

- **Psalm 110:1** behind v. 20, sit at my right hand
- **Psalm 8:4-6** behind v. 22, all things under his feet

Supporting passages

- **Deuteronomy 32:9** the LORD's portion is his people; question 3
- **Colossians 2:9** steelman, question 7
- **Hebrews 2:6-9** Dig Deeper after question 5; also objection bench
- **1 Corinthians 15:25-27** Dig Deeper after question 5
- **Ephesians 1:3** callback: every blessing already given
- **Ephesians 1:13-14** callback: sealed, inheritance

Terms

- ***plērōma***. fullness; the disputed word of verse 23
- ***kephalē***. head; Christ's relation to the body
- ***ekklēsia***. assembly, church; the called-out gathering

Catechism

- CCC 669. Christ, as Lord, is head of the Church his Body
- CCC 792. Christ the head of this Body
- CCC 795. the whole Christ, head and members
- CCC 830. catholic: the fullness of Christ's body united with its head