

KNOWING

EPHESIANS STUDY

'16 / TERM 1

NBC

I N T R O D U C T I O N

In the Bible the idea of “knowing” implies not just having knowledge about someone or something, but a deep, intimate connection. The primary (and clearest) picture we get of this word comes in the opening pages of Scripture:

*“Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant...”
(Genesis 4:1).*

The words “made love” are one word in the original Hebrew language – the word yadah – which actually means “to know” (as in “Adam knew his wife Eve”). Here, knowing implies genuine closeness and intimacy. It’s no wonder that this same word is used to describe our calling – we are to know God, to know others, to know ourselves and to know the world that God loves. But this knowledge is more than just facts about God or facts about the person next to you in church. This knowing we are called to implies we are called to go deeper; to dive head first into.

The book of Ephesians was a letter written by the apostle Paul, sometime around 60AD. Ephesus was a major port city on the western side of modern-day Turkey. It was a city known not only for its architectural wonders (like the Temple of Artemis), but its diverse culture – a culture that had no real connection or concern for Jesus as God’s Son.

What is Paul’s message to this community of believers in this harsh environment? To know.

The way they will find confidence and joy is for them to know the God who died for them, to know the people who share in this good news, to know who they are and where they've come from and to know the world around them and how to respond to it in grace and love. Ephesians is all about knowing.

Just because this letter was written roughly 1,956 years ago to a group of people on the other side of the planet living in a different world and culture does NOT mean this epistle has no relevance for us today. In fact, that's the beautiful thing about God's Word - it holds up over time and space and speaks today. So as we study Ephesians together, let the Holy Spirit speak to you, encourage you, correct you and challenge you to know. In the heart of the letter we find Paul's prayer for this church:

"I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses all knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."
(Ephesians 3:17b-19).

May this be your prayer, too.

KNOWING / OUR GOD

Week One

“Love Actually” is a movie that features many different character arcs happening at the same time. As you watch the movie, you struggle to see how one character’s story has anything to do with the next character in the following scene. The movie goes on and on like this for some time, before at the end, every story line is brought together into one grand story. At no point in the movie did any one character realize that their story was actually part of something greater that was taking place.

Have a quick read together of Ephesians 1:1-10.

In what ways do these verses talk about both our individual story and being part of a bigger story?

What is the grander story about here?

Ephesians fits under the category of a common Greco-Roman letter. Letters like this have been uncovered from all over the ancient world and they each bear the same characteristics. There is a greeting that identifies both the author and recipient(s), a wish for health or prosperity, then the body of the letter itself, and a final greeting. But as we’ll see, Ephesians, though similar to a traditional Greco-Roman letter, is glaringly different.

Right from the beginning, Paul lays it out there: this letter is about the grander story of God and His Son, Jesus. Here in these verses you see “of/in/from” God and Jesus three times each. In fact, Paul uses the phrase “in Christ” 146 times throughout his 13 letters – his most repeated theme. So from the start in Ephesians, Paul wants us to know the importance (and nothing to him is MORE important) of the idea that God has placed us “in Christ.”

Read Ephesians 1:1-2 again.

Why do you think this idea of being “in Christ” is so important to Paul? Why is it so important for us to know?

— GRACE & PEACE —

In verse 2, Paul opens as he does most of his letters with a blessing: “Grace and peace to you...” We often read over these lines and think they are just nice sounding sentiments to put in a letter opening. But those words, “grace” and “peace” are more than just pleasant words. They are central to much of Paul’s theology. Both of those words are standard greetings in Greek (grace) and Jewish (peace) culture. But because of Jesus, these words have new meaning. Grace (the word “charis” in Greek) is the idea that despite our sinful rebellion, God has given us Himself in Jesus. Peace (the Hebrew word “shalom”) means more than just absence of conflict – it means the total and complete well-being of our entire self because of what Jesus has done. So what Paul is really conveying is the whole of the gospel message in two little words: Because of Jesus we have been shown unlimited grace and have the confidence of God’s Spirit providing us His everlasting peace in Christ.

Verses 3-14 in the original Greek are actually one long sentence, presenting one cascading description after another of God's work in Christ. Many scholars believe this section (and maybe even the first three chapters of Ephesians) to actually be a song of praise about who God is and what He has done.

Most scholars believe Ephesians 1:3-4 functions as the thesis for the entire letter. If that is the case, what do you think Ephesians is all about? What do these verses say about how God looks at us? How do they relate our story to God's bigger story?

What does verse 4 say the point of our existence is? Are we chosen just to sit around until heaven comes? Or is there something more we are called to be?

ELECTION

In verses 4 and 11 the text says that God “chose” us and in verses 5 and 11 it says we were “predestined”. These verses are several of many that point to the theme of “election” (otherwise known as “predestination”). The basic understanding of this theme is that humans have no choice in the matter – that God Himself is the one who chooses who comes into the saving knowledge of Him. This certainly seems to be true in these verses and the context of the whole of Ephesians – it's all about God and what He does.





Yet a balance is found in the rest of the letter – yes, God is the one who chooses and elects, but you and I have a part to play. You and I freely choose to sin, to turn away from God, and we can choose to live and respond in obedience to Jesus (through the help of the Spirit) or not. Further, when God elects, He chooses a people (notice Paul’s use of “us” and “we” rather than “I” and “me”). Election is one of the church’s most beautiful and complex doctrines. But when presented the wrong way, it can do serious damage to people who are interested in Jesus.

Verse 5 mentions we were predestined for “adoption to sonship” through Jesus Christ. This term was a legal term in the Roman world for taking a person who was not part of your family and making them, in name and with all rights and privileges, a true son or daughter. The most famous example of this was Julius Caesar adopting his great-nephew Octavius as his son and heir, making him the true child of the emperor.

How does Paul describe who you are in God’s eyes? What does this say about the nature of God?

What does verse 6 say is the whole purpose of our adoption/ election (hint: the first word in verse 6 in the Greek could be read as “for” or “into” rather than “to”)?

If you have a read from verses 3 to verse 9 – there is a list of seven things God has done for us:

He blessed us with every spiritual blessing (v. 3)

He chose us in Him (v. 4)

In love He predestined us for adoption (v. 5)

He has freely given us His grace (v. 6)

In Him we have redemption (v. 7)

He lavished grace upon us (v. 8)

He made known to us His will (v. 9)

Now these are the very first things Paul has to say about God and His character. What do all these descriptions have in common (hint: whom does God do these things for)?

So Paul, more than anything else, wants this church to know God loves people and desires them to live according to the amazing grace He freely gives them. Does this match your understanding of who God is? Does it match what someone outside the church thinks about God?

Before Paul gets very far into his letter, he sings a song of God's loving character. There are certainly lots of other things we can say about God: He is judge, He is holy, He is jealous for us, He demands obedience...but the very first statement Paul declares is that God loves us and through His Son, has amazing things in store for us.

Take a moment (alone or as a group) and just let that sit with you for a while. The first thing you need to hear is that God cares for you. It's who He is. Maybe that's something you need to hear. Maybe it's something you've forgotten and it's time to remember. Maybe you've never heard it before and you need to let it sink down into your soul. Spend a quiet moment or two reflecting on what God's love for you means.

When that truth begins to resonate, it should then lead you to the next question: in light of this reality, how then do I respond?

KNOWING / GOD'S SON

Week Two

Imagine, that I (Travis), took a year of long service leave. Let's say sometime in that interval some new families began coming to our church. They see the sign out the front that says there is another pastor serving here. They hear talk of "the associate pastor" from time to time. One or two people may even say, "We sure do miss having Travis around!" Now let's say this new family approached you and said "Who is this Travis? How can I get to know him?" With the reality being that I'm not around, how then would you fill these people in? You could probably do lots of things: show them photos of me, let them listen to one of my sermons, describe what I look like, etc. But probably the very best way for this family to really get to know me (without me being present) would be to let them hang out with the people who know me best. Why? More than knowing random facts about me, these people would know me personally - they would, in some small sense, even be reflections of me.

In our last study we learned about Paul opening up his letter with a bursting song of who God is and what He does. But Paul is not content to merely tell us facts about God – his desire is that we would all know God personally. And what’s the best way to do this? To connect us with someone who knows God best, who knows God intimately, who is a true reflection of God: Jesus.

Read Ephesians 1:11-14.

What do these verses say about not only Jesus, but about how the relationship of the Trinity works (Father, Son, Spirit)?

According to Paul, how do we know we truly belong to God’s family (see verses 13-14)?

Can then one lose their “inheritance”? Why or why not? (this is a big question, but Paul’s quick response to this would be: Can a person undo what God has already done – if He chooses you, can you really un-choose?)

Read Ephesians 1:15-23.

(Continued)

This is the section of the Greco-Roman letter usually designated as “wishes for good health or fortune”. What is Paul’s “wish” for us?

If we are already in Christ, if we already have God’s Spirit in us (vv. 13-14), why do you think Paul prays that God might give us “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation”? Why does he pray that the eyes of our heart be enlightened to know the hope in which he called us?

Do YOU ever need to be reminded of the promises of God for your life? What do you think “the hope in which he called you” means?

H O P E

We often define the word “hope” today as “to wish for, to expect - but without certainty of the fulfillment; to desire very much, but with no real assurance of getting your desire.” In other words, hoping for something is the same thing as really wanting something to come true, even though it may not.

But this is not how the Bible understands hope. Hope in Scripture means “a strong and confident expectation”. Hope usually refers to this confidence being in something that is both in the future and invisible.





So a biblical definition of hope would be confidence in what God has for you and what He is going to do. In other words, it's not blind wishing, but certainty, even though it's not yet present.

Paul relates the word “hope” with that of “faith” and in Romans 8:24 he even says “For in hope we have been saved...” So here in Ephesians, Paul prays that the lights may go on inside people so that they will be certain of what God has promised.

Paul then prays that we may know the “riches of his glorious inheritance in His holy people.” Have you ever thought of God's people (the church, other Christians) as being something God really wants you to know about and delight in?

One of the best benefits of being in Christ, Paul says, is having access to one of God's most treasured possessions: other believers. The word “to know” here literally means “to look upon with favour” - to see and experience the beauty of God's church.

Is this something you regularly do? Delight in the relationships you have with other Christians? Why or why not?

One of the biggest obstacles of people feeling welcomed and loved is being ignored at church. How much do you go out of your way to “know” others deeply at church? If you don’t do this, why not, especially when Paul says this is what it means to know Jesus?

Finally, Paul prays we may know God’s great power, which is available to all who believe. How (according to verses 20-23) has God’s power been displayed?

The centerpiece of all these things: hope, the family of God, and His incomparable power are all focused around whom?

What do these verses say about Jesus? What do they say about who Jesus is to YOU?

If Jesus is the one in whom all things flow and hold together (being chosen in him, being given his Spirit, who gives us hope, family and power, who fills everything) – why do we often live like Jesus is just a “part” of our life? That he fits in somewhere with all the other things that make up our life (work, family, hobbies, rest, friends, education, etc.)?

If you remove Jesus - the centerpiece of all things - what happens to our life?

Paul uses the word “Christ” in Ephesians tons of times - it’s his favourite way of describing Jesus. But “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name or some random title. Christ is derived from the Hebrew word “Messiah”. In the Old Testament, we are told that God Himself was going to come and restore the world and our hearts back to where He intended them to be. Only God could do this - Israel failed. The patriarchs failed. The kings failed. It would take God Himself. This idea, that the only one anointed/chosen/worthy to do this was God, was called “the Messiah”. So when Paul uses the term “Christ” (a translation of the Hebrew “Messiah”) what he is saying is that He alone, and no one else, can restore this world and our heart back to rights. That without him, we are and can do nothing (John 15:5).

Do you believe this?

If so, does the way you live your life reflect this reality?

KNOWING / OUR IDENTITY

Week Three

Shows and movies about zombies have once again become very popular in our culture. A zombie, according to these shows, is a dead person walking - with no idea that they are dead, and more importantly, with no hope to change their status from “dead” to “alive”. They simply walk around aimlessly, following their instinctual craving that can’t actually satisfy, fill them or alter their situation.

Read Ephesians 2:1-3.

What is Paul’s perspective on humanity here? How are we, in his language, sort of like zombies?

The way Paul describes this condition is that you and I are “found in” some activity or state AND under the control or authority of someone or something else. Here’s a chart to illustrate this:

WHAT WE WERE DOING

Dead
You lived (Greek=Walked)
Disobedient
You lived/walked
Gratifying our cravings
Following
Leading ourselves

UNDER THE CONTROL OF:

Sins & transgressions
Ways of the world
Ruler of the kingdom of the air
Alongside the disobedient
Our flesh/sinful nature
Our flesh/sinful nature
Into wrath like everyone else

So Paul not only tells us we were being controlled by sin or are slaves to sin/the world/the devil, but that we WILLINGLY participated in this sort of life. This is most evident by the word translated as “lived”, which in the Greek is the word “walked”. It carries with it the idea that you and I purposefully walked around in a life that couldn’t care less about God being the center of everything.

Would you agree with Paul that verses 1-3 describe your life without Jesus? Why or why not?

How often do you actually think about that being your reality apart from Christ? Do you ever take a minute and think, “Without Jesus...I’m totally and completely hopeless.”? Or do you rather think, “Actually, I’m not all that bad.”? Be honest.

If you don’t know the depths of your sinful state, do you really think God’s gift of salvation in Jesus is really that special? What’s the difference between knowing you’re absolutely wrecked and hopeless without God’s intervention and then receiving God’s grace versus thinking “Well I’m okay” and then choosing to believe in Jesus?

Read Luke 7:36-50. How does the story of this woman reflect Paul’s line of thinking here?

The story then changes dramatically. Read Ephesians 2:4-9.

Just like Paul's description of God's character and actions in chapter 1, he gushes sentence after sentence here of how amazing God's love for us is. How exactly does Paul describe this love for us?

Who is the main actor in this story?

To Paul, God is not some sort of onlooker in the salvation process or sitting up in heaven grumpily, waiting to be appeased by lowly humans -He's the primary actor who deals with our hopelessness even while we were still "walking" in our sinfulness.

What does this say about what God thinks of you?
Just let that response sink down into your soul for a bit. We'll return to this in a moment.

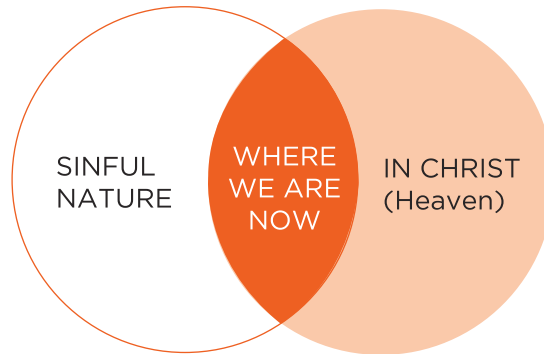
IN CHRIST

Paul is making some big statements here, all undergirded with the phrase "in Christ". As stated before, this is Paul's most repeated theme in all his letters. What he means by this is simple. Because of Jesus' death on our behalf and victory over sin and death, you and I are now welcomed into God's family through faith. That's what it means to be "in Christ". Paul here wants us to be aware of the reality we now find ourselves in. We are changed people with a changed condition and a new purpose.





However, this is how we often see ourselves after coming into the love of Jesus:



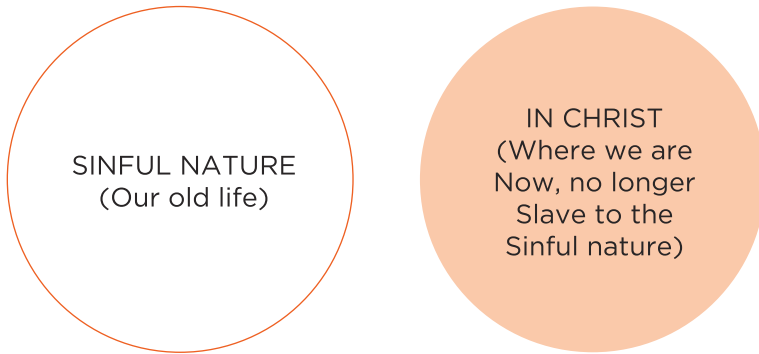
You can see here that many Christians often believe that because of Jesus, we now belong to his family (“in Christ”). Yet, because we are broken and live in a sinful world, we are still partially living in the realm of the flesh (or sinful nature) – which means a life that leaves God out of the picture and is left to its own human devices. So we think we have one foot “in Christ” and one foot “in the flesh” until we die or Jesus comes back.

This is NOT at all what Paul is talking about. He never says in any of his letters, let alone in Ephesians, that because of Jesus’ death and resurrection you are now “half saved” or “half changed”. Look at the language he uses. Does he say “Because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us kind of alive with Christ.”? Or does he say “And God partially raised us up with Christ.”?





Rather, Paul says you have been completely and totally transformed. We are no longer subject to Satan, the ways of this world, or helpless to fight sin. But we've been given God's Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14) which enables us to have access to God Himself and His power to overcome. In other words, we are no longer the same! A true representation of what Paul means looks like this:



What then, do we do with the fact that we often still fall short, we still sin, we still forget to pursue Jesus? Paul's answer to that is found in Ephesians 2:8-10.

Who, accordingly to Paul, is the one doing the work?

If it's by grace that we are saved (and not anything we can do) - then what is it that you and I should live by every day to stay away from sin and follow God?

Verse 10 literally translates as “You are God’s masterpiece”. How does that make you feel that God views you this way?

What then does Paul say follows on from these ideas of God showing His grace and making You His artwork (in verse 10)? For what purpose are we created?

If we’re not saved by works (vv. 8-9), then what role does works play in our salvation? How is doing good works the response to avoiding the old patterns of this world?

What do these verses say about YOUR identity (both before and after God showed up)?

What do they say about who God is and how He views you?

This passage should blow our minds. It should cause us to say, “God...you did this FOR ME? Me, of all people?!?” If this is truly our story, we’ve been brought from death to life, unlovely to loved, hopeless to reconciled, what should that do for us? What is an appropriate way for us to respond (v. 10)? How can you do that this week?

KNOWING / OUR COMMUNITY

Week Four

In the first century there was a major issue with the growing movement known as Christianity. Jesus and his disciples were all Jews from Judea (modern day Israel). They knew and practiced the Old Testament laws and customs. Both Jesus' message and the message of the first generation of followers were intimately connected with the story and promises of Israel.

As the good news about Jesus exploded, people from other cultures and nationalities started believing in and following after Jesus – people who had no previous knowledge of Israel and its history and customs. Because of this a major dilemma faced the growing church: what do we do with these people? Do they need to know and follow the Jewish laws in order to have access to Jesus and therefore be a part of our group (known as the church)? Do they need to get circumcised, follow the kosher food regulations, or even give up their culture and nationality in order to follow Jesus and be welcomed into the church?

The bigger question this raised, aside from the obvious theological issues, is this: what kind of community are we? How are we to relate to one another – people of diverse and conflicting backgrounds and stories? Are we supposed to be exclusive – that only people who are exactly like us can join us? How do we display the love of God to this world by how we treat one another?

With this in mind, read Ephesians 2:11-12.

Paul speaks of a group called the “Gentiles” – which is a catch-all word to mean “anyone not Jewish.” What does Paul have to say to this group? What is their story and how does it relate to the story of God’s covenant people, the Jews?

Most of us at NBC would be considered Gentiles as well (unless you were born into a Jewish family). How highly do you regard the Old Testament? How often do you follow the 613 laws found in there? What is Paul saying about you and me?

Read Ephesians 2:13-18.

What now has the cross done for this very different set of people?

Not only has Jesus’ work saved us (Ephesians 2:4-9) from our sinful nature and its desires and destination, but what has it done with us in relationship with others (see verses 14 and 16)?

Often we too narrowly focus on Jesus' death and resurrection as what he has done for ME, personally. I AM saved. I AM forgiven. I AM reconciled, etc.

Go back and read Ephesians 2:4-10. When speaking of God's love in Jesus, is Paul talking about ONLY ME here? Or is there a "we/us" element more prevalent here?

Paul's point is that YOU (you personally) are definitely included IN CHRIST (as we looked at before) - but that you are not alone and were never meant to be. Rather, that grace, salvation, reconciliation, and the love of God are all meant to be experienced IN COMMUNITY. And in these verses, Paul isn't just explaining a small side-effect the cross has put into motion (reconciliation between people with each other) - but is saying this is exactly what the love of God looks like. A major element in God's love for us is that you and I will be united in love with one another. Any animosity, weirdness, racial or social issues or prejudices have in Christ been put to the side. We are now all ONE in Christ and have access to the Father by the one Spirit.

What sort of implication do you think this should have on how you view and relate to others in your church/Community Group?

Read Ephesians 2:19-22.

How are the members of the body of Christ described here?

What is the point of this love and unity we ought to have for each other (see verse 22)?

“Being built together” carries with it the implication that you and other Christians are being crafted, bonded, established together so that God’s Spirit will be at work in the church. How have you seen that play out in your own life and church community? In what ways have you maybe prevented that from happening?

Read Ephesians 3:11-12.

What does Paul say here is the purpose of the church? How do you see that happening or not happening at our church?

In what ways can you work together with your brothers and sisters in Christ to see God’s wisdom made known to the world around you?

KNOWING / OUR PURPOSE

Week Five

Paul has just outlined the kind of God we have (chapter 1). This God demonstrates his love for us in Jesus with two major effects. We have been shown grace and included into God's family (2:1-10) AND we have reconciliation with one another (2:11-3:14). Through the rest of the letter to the Ephesians, Paul now wants to explain in detail how those truths work themselves out in the life of the believer, both individually and in community.

Read Ephesians 3:14-21.

This is Paul's great prayer for the church in Ephesus. In light of God's character and love, in view of this double reconciliation we have (with God and each other) - he then stops and prays.

What does Paul pray for?

The desired outcome for this prayer can roughly be divided into three major sections:

- 1 -

Prayer for their hearts/inner being to be strengthened (vv. 16-17a). This relates to one's passions/emotions/desires to be found in Christ's Spirit and power.

- 2 -

Prayer for love to be the binding reality in their community (vv. 17b-18a). This relates to our actions and outward display of Jesus' love to be evident in all our relationships.

- 3 -

Prayer that we may have knowledge of Jesus' love for us so that we may be filled with God's fullness (vv. 18b-19). This relates to our mind/thoughts/plans, that the focus of our life

How do these three sections speak to every area of our life?

Which area do you feel strong in? In which area do you feel needs to be more of a reality in your life?

How can your community (at church or in your Community Group) help foster these things in you?

Read Ephesians 4:1-6.

What is this section about?

Paul's plea is simple. He finds himself a prisoner, in chains, probably on his way to death. He knows his earthly future is short. So he urges these Christians not to waste their time in things that don't matter, because he knows life is but a breath.

Is this section about me, individually, and how I conduct myself in private? Or is Paul's view of the Christian life meant to be lived out loud?

Read Ephesians 4:7-16.

Paul mentions here that Jesus has given everyone in the body of Christ different and unique gifts...for what purpose (hint: see the end of verse 12)?

This list is not exhaustive, meaning this is only a brief set of different gifts people can have. The easy thing to do is read this list and say, "Well, I'm not called to be a pastor or evangelist" and write the whole thing off. That's not the point. Paul could have easily gone on to say (and this is implied) - "Others are called to be welcomers and prayer warriors and behind-the-scenes servers and people who sit alongside the lonely and those who prepare meals, etc." In other words, WE ALL have a part to play in the body of Christ to build up the church.

What gift do you think you've been given? In what ways are you using that gift? In what ways have you failed to use that gift or could be using it more? (note: if you don't know your gifts or passions or whatever, step one is to ask the people in your group what they think. Step two: sit down with one of the pastors or church elders and explore this even more).

What does Paul say will happen to us when each of us uses the gifts/passions/talents/personality we have for Jesus (vv. 14-16)?

What is one major way you can step up and serve the body of Christ this year? How can your group or your church leadership help you accomplish this?

KNOWING / EACH OTHER

Week Six

Read Ephesians 4:17-19.

Paul here repeats what he said in Romans 1 and what James says in James 1:13-18 (there are lots of other allusions elsewhere as well).

As Christians, we often think our major hindrance to a full life in Christ is sin itself. That if we could just stop doing evil things, then we'll be okay.

But what is Paul suggesting about where the REAL problem lays (before the act of sin even happens)?

He describes a way of life that has essentially, in the mind and the heart, turned off the light to life in God and as a result, sin then comes forth (verse 19). What this means is that “trying not to sin” is not ultimately solving our issue with walking righteously with Jesus. We need to have our minds and hearts renewed and transformed. Which leads us to...

Read Ephesians 4:20-24

What does Paul say is the antidote for broken and depraved hearts and minds?

IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME

Paul uses three phrases which tell us what this looks like: to take/put off, to be made new and to put on. Although these phrases seem to say “If you DO these things for yourself, then you'll be able to live for God,” the Greek text has a slightly different angle. It implies that Jesus has already done those things for you – he has already put off your old self, he has already renewed your minds, he has already clothed you in your new self.





The whole letter of Ephesians is about GOD as the central character and what He has already done for you. So instead of feeling like “I really need to try harder at renewing my mind...” the mood of the passage is actually more like “Jesus has already done the work for you...all you have to do is allow yourself to live in that reality, to live like it’s actually true.”

How does that change how we understand this section?

Read Ephesians 4:25-5:7

Here Paul is now telling us what it looks like to live in the reality of Christ’s love. He has done the work to make us new...yet we still have to act like we live in that truth by the way we think, speak, view others, use our resources, etc.

How many of these instructions relate to our outward expression of faith? In other words, does the Christian life primarily entail loving Jesus privately....or is it a life that’s meant to be lived and worked out in community?

Why does Paul stress so heavily how we ought to love and act toward others?

In which of these areas do you personally struggle? Be honest! This is where community really comes into play. If we can't be open about our struggles with our brothers and sisters in Christ, how can we possibly expect to live as we're called to biblically?

Read Ephesians 5:8-20.

Paul closes this section once again, as he opened it – reminding the church of the reality they now live in.

What do you make of the warning he issues in verses 11-15? What is that about?

If Christ is coming to reveal his light upon this dark world (an allusion to his return), what do you think it means to take verse 16 seriously?

Do you actually live each day making the most of every moment for Jesus? Why or why not? What do you think your life and your world would look like if you actually tried to live this out each and every day?

Paul concludes with an instruction to be walking worship leaders (verse 19).

How does having God's song on your heart allow you to live a life of thankfulness (verse 20) instead of a life that demands more and more?

This entire passage is about realizing you and I live in a new reality because of Jesus' transforming work on the cross. Paul then says the evidence of this life is demonstrated by how we know, love, care for, go out of our way for, welcome, and prevent others from stumbling. It's about knowing one another deeply and considering your fellow believers as a way of showing the love of Christ.

Tim Keller (a pastor and author from New York city) says there are two types of people in a church. There are those who expect others to "feed" them and care for them - and if those things aren't happening, they are often bitter because they feel they should be the recipient of all of the church's concern. Usually, he says, these people are not satisfied no matter how many people reach out to them. Then there are those who instead of thinking about their needs being met, get up out of their seats, out of their comfort zone, and say, "What can I do for this family of mine?" And they serve without complaint or expectation. Usually, he finds, these people have ingrained in them a deep understanding of Jesus' incredible love for them (Ephesians 3:14-20). As a natural overflow of the love they have received in Christ, they give themselves to others.

Which type of person are you? How can you live each day in the love of Christ so that his love naturally pours out of you (see 4:20-24 again)?

KNOWING / OUR STRENGTH

Week Seven

“Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.”
(C.S Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 1952)

“Throughout the letter Paul has described the privilege and wonder of life in Christ and implored his readers to live in a way suitable to such privilege. From 4:17 on he has been urging his readers to stand against the pagan lifestyle around them. Gross sins should not even be named among them, and they should separate from and reprove the darkness. Their homes should reflect the unifying and self-giving character of the gospel.

All this requires determined effort, for the darkness is still very present. Now in the last section of the body of the letter, Paul sets forth an effective summary and challenge. Readers need to be prepared, as if for battle, for right living does not just happen and opposition is certain.” (Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 1996)

Read Ephesians 6:10-20.

This section of a Greco-Roman letter is called the peroratio, which is the final section of speech in a letter that summarizes all that comes before in order to excite the reader into action. Paul attempts to get us out of our chairs by speaking of a battle at hand that we are called to take part in.

What sort of battle does Paul envisage here?

How often do you think about what is happening “behind the scenes” of what is happening in life?

OPEN YOUR EYES

In books like Daniel and Revelation we are told that despite appearances, there is a lot of activity happening that we cannot see, in what we might call the spiritual realm. In 2 Kings 6, there is a story of the prophet Elisha, who is being hunted by the king of Aram. As the forces of the king close in on Elisha, his servant sees the approaching army and calls out in alarm. Elisha says not to worry, that “those with us are more than those with them.” The servant looks around and thinks, “What are you talking about? There’s just the two of us here!”





So Elisha then prays for his eyes to be opened, and the servant then looks around and sees hills full of horses and chariots of fire surrounding and protecting them.

In the 1995 movie *The Usual Suspects*, Kevin Spacey's character utters the line "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist." Paul wants the church to know that they DO have an enemy who is both real and powerful – "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (verse 12)

Do you think this is true? Do you ever live like this is true?

The Bible, and Paul here, wants us to know there is a constant battle going on, both for our soul and for this world. What is Paul's solution for this battle (verse 11)?

There is a line of logic Paul describes for us: be strong in the Lord...which we do by putting on the full armor of God... which then allows us to stand firm. According to verses 14-18, how do we "stand firm"?

How would you describe this equipment:

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The belt of truth

The breastplate of righteousness

Feet fitted with the gospel of peace

The shield of faith

The helmet of salvation

The sword of the spirit

-

What do you think it looks like to equip yourselves with each of these things on a daily basis?

What part does prayer play in this battle (verses 18-20)?

How often do you find yourself praying for God to be at work behind the scenes?

We are told throughout the Bible, that the war between good and evil, between God and Satan, has actually already been won through Jesus' death and resurrection. The devil and evil are actually finished with. But like a shark that's been caught and brought on deck, there is still some bite left. Paul suggest that you and I not become lazy or caught unaware. He then asks for prayer that he may make the gospel known fearlessly (verse 19). The idea here is that it is our calling as Christians, no matter our age or stage (in prison in Paul's case) to live faithfully and courageously rather than going through the motions of faith.

How would you describe your walk with Jesus currently? Is it one that lives boldly in God's strength, being equipped to stand and sharing the gospel without fear? Or is it sort of just like routine?

What can you do this week to live out loud the sort of life Paul describes here?

KNOWING / OUR VICTORY

Week Eight

“When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride” (Isaac Watts)

One of the biggest issues both casual readers and scholars have about the New Testament is that the two biggest sections – the Gospels and Paul’s letters – don’t seem to have too much in common. Jesus speaks primarily about the “kingdom of God”. Paul speaks primarily about being “in Christ.” Jesus stresses importance on compassion and loving the broken. Paul stresses the grace of God to sinners. Jesus seems more concerned about us following him. Paul seems to be more concerned about having correct theology. How is it that Christianity’s biggest advocate (Paul) does not seem to emphasize the same message of his Lord?

This, however, is a false dichotomy. Though perhaps they use different language, Paul and Jesus maintain total and complete harmony in their message. Compare, for example, what is thought of as both of these men’s most famous sayings:

Read John 3:16.

Compare this with Ephesians 2:4-8.

How similar or dissimilar do you find these statements?

What is the basic message of both of these passages?

As you can see, both Paul and Jesus pinpointed the centerpiece of the Christian life: Jesus' death and resurrection. That through the work of the cross, everything is different.

Paul wants us to know just how important the cross is - that everything (both our theology and our actions) pour out of it. Look up and read each of these passages below from Ephesians. What do they each say about Jesus' death and resurrection? What do they maintain the cross has accomplished for us?

Ephesians 1:7

Ephesians 2:4-10

Ephesians 2:13

Ephesians 2:16

Ephesians 3:14

Ephesians 5:25

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is centered around what God has done for us through Jesus. He speaks about it multiple times throughout the letter so that it will soak into our inner being (3:16). The result of this, of knowing the source of our victory, is that we are able to both know God deeply and personally AND live for Him out loud in this world and in the church. It's the same message Jesus proclaimed.

What then should the cross do for you personally? Have a look at Ephesians 5:1-2.

How can you follow God's example in Christ by "walking in the way of love"? What does that look like for YOU?

What does it mean that Christ gave himself up for us "as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God"?

PLEASING AROMA

In the book of Genesis, after the Flood story, Noah prepares an animal sacrifice, which he burns on an altar. In Genesis 8:21 we are told that the "aroma" of this sacrifice as it ascended to the heavens was "pleasing to God". Later, in the book of Leviticus, various instructions are given to the priests of the Lord on the different sacrifices for sin people could make.





In each of these sacrifices again we are told that as the smoke arises from these burnt offerings, the aroma pleases God. In the Jewish mind, the sacrifice (whether it was an animal or food or otherwise) was a symbol representing the person making the offering. The burning symbolized the complete and total surrender of that thing (and therefore the person offering it) to God. This act that something was being totally given over to God resulted in God being pleased. Here in Ephesians (and elsewhere in the New Testament) we are told that making sacrifices no longer matters, because Jesus himself became the sacrifice once and for all. His total surrender of himself on the cross became the fragrant offering, or aroma, that pleased the Father.

If we are called to follow after Jesus' example, what do you think it means for YOU to live as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God?

How can your group together live and serve in such a way this year that reflects the effects of the cross in your lives?

KNOWING / HOW TO SERVE

Week Nine

Read Ephesians 6:5-9.

What is this passage about? How does this passage make you feel?

One of the biggest complaints you'll often hear from non-Christians is that the Bible supports slavery. Nowhere here does Paul say, "Masters, set all your slaves free, because slavery is not of the Lord." Why do you think this is the case?

In the ancient world, slavery was the backbone of society. When you think of things like the pyramids in Egypt or the Coliseum in Rome - these were constructed on the back of slaves. Not only were slaves responsible for building these great wonders of the world - slaves were the primary tradesmen, teachers, message carriers, household and business managers of the ancient world. Some estimates calculate that as much as 40% of the population at the time were slaves.

Further, slavery then is not the same thing as slavery now (for a broader look at this, check out J. Albert Harrill's book *Slavery in the New Testament*). For some, slavery was actually an escape from poverty, debt or a life without advancement. A large percentage of slaves were "hired" from the community, given housing, food, payment, education and allowed incredible amounts of freedom. Of course, there were also many slaves who were poorly treated, chained and forced to do grueling tasks without any sort of benefit to them.

In all of this, Paul's instructions to slaves and masters are actually quite radical, advanced and revolutionary for their time.

Have a quick read of the letter to Philemon, that short little book between Titus and Hebrews.

Who, in this letter is Philemon? What's his history and relationship with Paul? With Jesus?

Who is Onesimus (verse 16 spells it out)?

What has happened in this letter is that Onesimus, a slave, either ran away or, more likely, was sent on an errand to Paul but stayed longer than he was supposed to. Onesimus then, through hanging out with Paul, becomes a follower of Jesus. Paul then writes Philemon a letter saying he is sending Onesimus back home.

But what does Paul want Philemon to know about Onesimus and how he should view him (see verse 16 again)?

Even though legally Onesimus was still considered a slave, Paul tells Philemon that because of his faith in Christ, Philemon and Onesimus are now “brothers” in the Lord. Their relationship is totally different. In other words, this “employee” of yours is your family and as a Christ-follower, you are to treat him as such. This would be a radical concept in that time. Though we hear of various slaves being set free in the ancient world, there are almost no examples of slaves being “adopted” as family members. This meant that slaves had all the same rights and privileges as natural family members.

Read Galatians 3:26-29.

What is this passage saying?

How does it speak as slaves being family?

What participation do slaves have in the church community?

SLAVES & RELIGION

In most ancient belief systems, slaves could have no part in the religious experience. Or if they did, it was usually to serve as sexual slaves to “worshippers” in fertility religions. But in the New Testament, slaves are freely invited into the church community and have equal status to everyone else.

This caused Christians, even within a generation of the New Testament writers, to condemn slavery as wrong and advocate for the rights and freedom of slaves in the Empire (often resulting in more persecution for them).

Rewind back to Ephesians 6:5-9. We (hopefully) don't have any people in slavery in our church today. So what do we do with verses like this?

This passage is about relationships with others in the church – how we ought to view and treat others, no matter what their background or appearance or history may be. What is Paul's main point about relationships we ought to have in the church (see verse 7)?

Do you serve “wholeheartedly”? Why or why not?

Throughout the Bible, those who belong to God are often called “slaves” (of the King). Paul on many occasions calls himself a “slave”. The biblical understanding is not that we are forced by God to do things we don’t want to do with no benefit – but people who give up our rights in order to serve our Master with all we have.

Do you see yourself this way? Or is your life characterized by you having ownership of who you are, what you do, how you behave, how you give, etc.?

And how does God view slaves? Read John 15:14-16.

So biblically, slaves are family, slaves are called friends, slaves, despite giving themselves up, find even more freedom and acceptance through Christ and the church than they would have when “free”. This is certainly revolutionary for its time. It’s revolutionary now.

To conclude using Paul’s own ideas...

How can you accept, love on and serve the body of Christ, especially those who are entirely different to you?

And how can you surrender your life wholeheartedly to Jesus? How does that affect the way you spend money? Time? The way you drive? Work? Travel? Be specific!

N B C

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