

INTRODUCTION TO EPHESIANS

The book of Ephesians was written from within the confines of a Roman prison. Paul's tone in the epistle might not betray his conditions, but the unjust nature of Paul's incarceration and the grounds for his accusation color the historical landscape behind this book and give clarity towards its timeliness for the church, both then and now.

Paul was falsely accused during his time in Jerusalem around the year AD 57.¹ Having provoked the ire of the ruling Jewish parties with the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council of Elders, by converting from a Pharisee to a Christian and subsequently preaching the Gospel, Paul was held on the trumped of charges that he had brought a Gentile into the inner sanctum of the Temple (for more details on Paul's arrest and his journey to Rome, read Acts 21-27). For Jews this was a violation of Temple Law, and such a serious one that the governing Romans had a standing agreement with the Sanhedrin to punish violators of the law to prevent riots over the offense.² The wall that divided the Court of the Gentiles, where Gentiles were allowed within the Temple, from the Court of the Jews was carved with death threats to make the point clearer for any unaware Gentiles that they were not welcome in the holiest areas.³ The racism that Jews held towards Gentiles ran to the roots of the first century Jewish identity. Thus, when Paul speaks of Christ breaking down the "dividing wall of hostility" in Ephesians 2:14, he is speaking both to the deep cultural needs of Israel and to the institutional injustice of Jewish exclusivity.⁴

Paul wrote this epistle to the church in Ephesus in AD 62 while still imprisoned in Rome. Seeing that Ephesus was the provincial capital in Asia Minor, it was intended as a circulatory letter that would get passed around

1
Crossway, The ESV Study Bible, 2074

2
Craig S. Keener, The Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, 544

3
ESV Study Bible, 2265

4
Keener, 544

to other churches and read throughout the region.⁵ However, the book is incredibly relevant specifically to Ephesus and the church there.

Ephesus was a very old city even by the time Paul wrote his epistle. It was home to the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, which was originally finished in BC 550 and at that time dedicated to Ashteroth, the Mesopotamian fertility goddess (the patron of the frequently mentioned Ashera poles of the Old Testament). Later, in BC 330 when the area was first captured by the Greeks, the temple was grafted into the cult of Artemis, though that specific syncretic interpretation of Artemis was unique to the area. By the time the Ephesian church was planted, the Temple of Artemis had been home to pagan worship for almost 600 years and was a huge engine of economic stability for the city.⁶

The city itself was a large cosmopolitan melting pot; it was Roman by law, Mesopotamian by heritage, and Greek in its worldview, while being home to many different ethnic groups and economic classes.⁷ However, a sizable Jewish population existed in Ephesus, as many Jewish communities in the dispersion existed throughout Asia Minor. When Paul first came to Ephesus to preach the gospel, he started in the synagogue, but later began preaching to Gentiles in the city (Acts 19). Thus the church started as a mixture of former Jews and pagans who now worshipped Christ together in one church body. But old tensions still flared, which explain the overall theme of the book itself: unity.

Gentiles and Jews alike tended to bring some of their older religious customs with them into their newfound belief in Christ. Jews in particular tended to continue in observing Jewish customs, including the Sabbath and dietary laws, and most importantly, a continued separation from and disdain for Gentiles.⁸ We see Paul denounce Peter for this very thing in Galatians 2, an exhibition of the divide between former Jews and Gentiles even within the Christian church. Paul hopes to defeat this a demonstrate that Jesus has made peace by creating "in himself one new man in place of the two" (Eph. 2:15). In chapter three as Paul talks about the "mystery" of the Gentiles' inclusion in the promise of Jesus, Paul is rousing the Jews to remember

5 Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 293

6 J.D. Douglas, Merrill C. Tenney, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 95

7 ESV Study Bible, 2259

8 Robert S. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*, 115



the ancient promises made to Abraham and his descendants and to realize that, as fellow heirs of Christ in God, the Gentiles are as much the children of God as the Jews.

Paul goes into the great detail over the need for unity in the church, delving into the gritty aspects of Gentile-Jew relations, and even continues onward towards familial relationships and neighborly love. This latter topic would have been difficult, given the history of tensions between the Christians of Ephesus and the rest of the city. Combined with the tensions Christians would have felt towards interacting with their pagan surroundings, many in the Greco-Roman society of Ephesus would have branded Christians as separatists in return for not partaking in the state-sponsored religion and practices of Rome.⁹ To overcome these tensions, Paul calls the church in Ephesus to walk in a manner worthy of the calling of which they have been called, to walk in love, and to be strong in the Lord in the face of persecution (Eph. 4:1, 5:2, & 6:10).

9

Keener, 550



EPHESIANS (WEEKS 1-4)

As we begin a new series, we've changed the format of community group guides to better assist you in your preparation and in facilitating group discussion. Please review the PDF "Using CG Discussion Guides" on the Leader Resources page to understand the format that the guide follows.

For additional study materials, you may also consult the "Introduction to Ephesians" for helpful contextual information about this series and these guides. Supplementary articles on the Church, the Gospel, and the Trinity are also available at the end of this document.



Ephesians: Love the Church, Be the Body (Week 1)

Section 1: Knowing & Understanding

Paul, a prisoner for the gospel, is calling us to godly living by the grace given to us, which was highlighted in Ephesians 2.

- Use the PDF “Introduction to Ephesians” (found on the Leader Resources page) to discuss briefly Paul's current situation (where & why).
- Read Acts 20:17-36 and discuss Paul's experience with the church in Ephesus by highlighting key experiences Paul shared with that community.
- What calling is Paul referring to (Ephesians 1:1-13; 2:7; 3:10)?
- Why does Paul emphasize the worth of the calling itself and the person who is called?

Section 2: Evaluating

We were dead in our sin and ruled by our selfish desires. As a result, we were eternally separated from God. Yet, because of God’s great love, we were made alive in Christ and adopted as sons and daughters of God. He is continuously unveiling the immeasurable riches of his grace for us.

- When do you doubt your calling the most (that you were saved by grace through faith in Jesus)?
- What the specific sins in your life keep you from walking in your calling?
- How does Jesus comfort us in those times of doubt and sin?

Section 3: Applying

Because we are his workmanship created to do good works that he has already prepared for us:

- What do we need to change our attitude toward work Christ has done for us and through us?
- What do we need to do to continue to or to begin to walk worthy of our calling?



Ephesians: Saved to be the Church (Week 2)

Section 1: Knowing & Understanding

In part two of our series, we learn that the Church in Christ is a living organism made up of former individual slaves to sin who have been set free and united in Christ. The Church thrives most when it functions in unity while under the authority of Jesus and power of the Holy Spirit.

- What are some misconceptions of the Church that do not match the above statement? How has this influenced our own views of the Church?
- When you read this passage, what does it teach you about the Church or what does it reinforce that you already knew?

Section 2: Evaluating

The work of Christ unites us together and gives us our identity as sons and daughters of God.

- How has your past religious experience affected how you see the Church and how you function as part of it (giving, serving, membership, worship, etc.)?
- When do you feel most separated from God and the Church?
- How does this passage address our desire to isolate ourselves or past negatives experiences we've had?

Section 3: Applying

We were divided and at war with ourselves, each other, and God. Now we are a Church united together in Christ in a bond of peace. As a result, we should be eager to see this lived out in our city.

- How do your thoughts of the Church need to change to help cultivate this truth of peace in our church?



Ephesians: Bearing One Another (Week 3)

Section 1: Knowing & Understanding

The past two weeks, we have explained our individual identities as sons and daughters of God and our corporate calling as the Church. In verse two, Paul gives three ways in which we should demonstrate our calling.

- What are the three ways we are called to demonstrate our new calling?
- How does the world view these characteristics?
- Why would Paul need to remind Christian Jews and Gentiles to act this way towards one another?

Section 2: Evaluating

In unity we are to follow Christ's example of humility, gentleness, and patience with one another. This is completely opposite of the cultural norms and our flesh. Instead of giving in to those influences, the Holy Spirit works in us to make us a Church that seeks every opportunity to demonstrate Christ's example.

- When is it most difficult for you to follow Christ's example?
- How has Jesus demonstrated these characteristics to you recently?
- How did Jesus demonstrate these characteristics in his life and death?
- Why are these attitudes important for the unity of the Church?

Section 3: Applying

Think through what some of the next steps might be in our lives, given our discussion. When we believe the truth of the gospel, we can more fully love and serve others gladly.

- Who are some people in your life that exemplify these characteristics?



Ephesians: Theology (Week 4)

Section 1: Knowing & Understanding

This week's discussion focuses on the various elements of our Christian unity and how they are held together based on who God is.

- Verse four lists different elements of our Christian unity. What are they?
- The list ends with God being the unifying factor. What are the three ways that he functions and what does this say about his character and his relationship with us?
- How does this conflict with how your "Love One" views God?

Section 2: Evaluating

Verse four is a concise example of the Trinity. The Trinity gives us a theological foundation that makes it possible for the Church to unite and walk in love and faith.

- Why is it important to remind the Church of who God is in order for the Church to be unified in him?
- How do the Father ("over all"), Jesus ("through all"), and the Spirit ("in all") play a role in our salvation and life as a Church?
- When is it hardest for you see what God is doing in your life?
- Which promises of God are the hardest to believe and why?

Section 3: Applying

We should strive for a proper understanding of who God is and pursue a healthy lifestyle that demonstrates that we believe God is who he says he is and keeps his promises.

- How can we as a community strive for a better understanding of who God is?
- How can we use our understanding of the Trinity to help cultivate unity and prevent isolation in the Church?



ONE: The Beauty of Being the Church

Week 5 – Grace – Ephesians 4:7

Section 1: Knowing & Understanding

Christ accomplishes unity in the Church not by making all of his followers the same but in unique people who come together to use the gifts God has graced them with for ministry (Romans 12:6).

- What does Paul mean by grace in this passage?

Section 2: Evaluating

Christ gives gifts to all his people as he sees fit.

- How have you seen God's grace demonstrated in your life?
- When do you feel that God's grace is most absent?

Section 3: Applying

- What steps can we take to be consistently aware of God's grace?
- How can we regularly demonstrate grace to others?



ONE: The Beauty of Being the Church

Week 6 – Gifts – Ephesians 4:11

Section 1: Knowing & Understanding

This is a reminder that God takes ordinary people and gives them to the Church as servant leaders to aid in the building up of the body.

- What do the function of these gifts say about what God wants to accomplish in the world through the Church?

Section 2: Evaluating

We must value the variety of gifts in the Church and not think that one gift is more important than another. There is no need to be envious of someone else's gifting or to think we are more significant than others because of the gifts we are given.

- In what ways do these gifts benefit the body?
- What is preventing you from using your gifts in the church?

Section 3: Applying

It is one thing to know what you are told to do. It is something entirely different to actually do it.

- What are some low risk ways you can immediately start serving the body of Christ?
- How can you show appreciation for the pastors, teachers, and evangelists in your life?



ONE: The Beauty of Being the Church

Week 7 – Equip the Saints – Ephesians 4:12

Section 1: Knowing & Understanding

Acts of kindness don't always equate to ministry. The difference lies in the desired outcome. Jesus wanted us to love our neighbor and do good works not to accomplish a moral victory but to advance his kingdom

- What is the work of ministry?

Section 2: Evaluating

Once again this is about the nature of the church and God's desired outcome through the church.

- Why do we build up the body?
- When is the work of ministry not a joy?

Section 3: Applying

Some followers of Christ have the gifting and disposition to be leaders and some don't, but all believers are equally important to the healthy functioning of the church.

- What are your spiritual gifts?
- How are you using your gifts to fulfill verses 12-13?
- If you are not, how can you and your group take steps to begin to do so?



ONE: The Beauty of Being the Church

Week 8 – Grow into Maturity – Ephesians 4:14-16

Section 1: Knowing & Understanding

God never intended for his people to remain spiritual infants.

- What is the difference between spiritual infancy and spiritual maturity?
- What is one thing both hold in common?

Section 2: Evaluating

No one is born perfect. Life is a consistent journey where God is revealing himself to us, pointing us to Jesus and preparing us to accomplish his will.

- Name and describe some people in the bible that progressed in spiritual maturity?
- What was common in each of their lives?
- What often gets in the way of your spiritual maturity?

Section 3: Applying

Discipleship is following others who follow Christ so that you can mature to leverage your gifts to do the same for others.

- What steps can you take to be on a consistent trajectory of growing to look like Christ?



SUPPLEMENTARY ARTICLES

Below you'll find some topical articles written to assist you in your study of Ephesians.

The Church

The Church is a mosh-pit of imperfect people from various ethnic, social, and economical backgrounds. They were once dead in sin, but because of God's grace and their faith in Christ, they are alive in Christ and united as one body to bring God glory as they carry out his agenda on earth (Ephesians 2). This was always God's plan. To reveal himself through not just individuals but a collective people who would bear his name (Genesis 12; Exodus 15:13-16). The Old Testament proves this by showing us how God's relationship with Israel points to Jesus and his Church (Exodus 4:22; Ezekiel 14; Isaiah 5; Deuteronomy 32:10).

Historically, Christians believe that the Church is one, holy, catholic (universal) and apostolic organism. Each of the four beliefs points to aspects of who God is:

- God is one, and therefore the Church should exist as one unified community of believers (Ephesians 4:5-6).
- God is holy and has consecrated the Church as holy. This does not mean the Church is perfect, but has been set apart to accomplish his will (1 Corinthians 5-6, 2 Corinthians 6).
- God's universality points to his sovereign reign of all creation—past, present, and future. The Church practically functions as groups of local congregations throughout the earth and can be traced back to the Old Testament. The Church will be complete when Jesus returns for his bride (Revelations 21-22).
- Finally, the Church is apostolic in that its principles are founded on God's own words that he spoke through apostles to pass on to his people (John 17:20; Galatians 1:6-9; 1 Timothy 3:15).

Each local church has the freedom to function according to its various cultural traditions in order to minister to its context for the sake of drawing men and women to Christ. This may include style of worship, events, and language (1 Corinthians 9:22). This is only acceptable when the local church submits their personal preferences under an unwavering commitment to rightly preaching God's Word and faithfully administering both communion and baptism (Matthew 28; Luke 22:19; Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 11; 1 Peter 2:21).

Other distinctions that help us to identify the church are: membership (1 Corinthians 5; Matthew 18); elders and deacons (Acts 6; 1 Peter 5; 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1:5-9); and church discipline (Hebrews 12:1-14). At the same time, these ideas should never replace the central understanding that Jesus is the cornerstone of the church and it exists at his pleasure and for his glory.



The Gospel

The Gospel is the good news that there is eternal freedom from sin and access to everlasting joy in God, our Creator, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and a future hope that he will return for his people.

The Gospel in the Bible

There are many beautiful examples of the gospel in Scripture, some of which are catalogued below.

Isaiah 53:4-6

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Romans 3:23-24

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Romans 4:4-5

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

1 Corinthians 15:3-4

I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

Galatians 3:13-14

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Ephesians 2:4-5

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.

Philippians 2:6-8

Though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Colossians 1:19-20

In [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.



Colossians 2:13-14

You, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Titus 3:4-7

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Hebrews 2:14-17

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

1 Peter 2:22-25

[Jesus] committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.



The Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity means that there is one God who eternally exists as a unity of three distinct Persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Stated differently, God is one in essence and three individual subsistences or persons. The word "subsistence" means something that has a real existence. The word "person" denotes individuality and self-awareness. These definitions express three crucial truths:

1. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct Persons.
 - a. Each of the three persons is not the other two.
 - b. Each of the three persons is related to the other two but distinct from them.
2. Each Person is fully God (divine).
 - a. Each of the three persons is completely divine in nature though each is not the totality of the Godhead.
3. There is only one God.
 - a. Deuteronomy 6:4-5, 1 Kings 8:60, Isaiah 44:6-8, 1 Samuel 2:2

The Bible speaks of the Father as God (Philippians 1:2), Jesus as God (Titus 2:13), and the Holy Spirit as God (Acts 5:3-4). This shows us that they are in fact three separate persons. The Bible also speaks about subordination in the Trinity, which further proves the distinctness of the three. The Father sent the Son into the world (John 3:16), so he cannot be the same person as the Son. Likewise, after the Son returned to the Father (John 16:10), the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit into the world (John 14:26; Acts 2:33). Therefore, the Holy Spirit must be distinct from the Father and the Son. Other examples of their distinctness can be found in these verses:

Matt. 28:19

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

1 Cor. 12:4-6

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.

2 Cor. 13:14

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

Eph. 4:4-7

There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

1 Pet. 1:2

.. according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure.



Jude 20-21

But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith; praying in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life.

