



ABSOLUTE DISCUSSION GUIDES

SEPTEMBER 11 – NOVEMBER 20, 2016

Absolute

An absolute is an idea or value that is regarded (or presented) as universally valid. Statements like these are absolutes:

- Parents who spank their children are abusive.
- If you're against gun rights, you're against freedom.
- UNC is the worst.

Everyone believes in absolutes. Even in light of philosophical arguments against the existence of absolute Truth, everyone relies on absolutes for daily life. For a while the philosopher and mathematician René Descartes was driven to insanity with the thought that reality itself was a figment of his imagination. Yet even Descartes returned to an absolute that helped him pierce his philosophical darkness: I think, therefore I am. Base-level assumptions like Descartes' about existence, morality, and perception are inherent to humanity (that's also an absolute statement, FYI).

However, our absolutes typically fall short in some capacity because human absolutes come with human limitations. What we really need to pierce the darkness of reality and the world around us is God's word. God's word boldly declares truth that cuts to the heart of life and undergirds us through our darkest hours. Otherwise we can only blindly search for pillars of truth to stand on.

Throughout Ephesians we see God's word make astounding declarations about the nature of God, humanity, and what God has accomplished through Jesus. In studying the book of Ephesians we are presented with an opportunity to hear the proclamation of God's absolute Truth and have our assumptions radically changed.

An introduction to Ephesians

Ephesians is about two primary things: what God has done in Christ and who we are in Christ. As you read Ephesians you'll see the phrase "in Christ" over and over. The first, what God has done in Christ, involves reconciling the entirety of creation to himself, as well as making peace between himself and us. The second, who we are in Christ, declares us as adopted children of God and united with him and with one another in Christ.

These things are all emphatic declaratives; they aren't maybes or kind ofs. God through his word declares these things to be absolutely true about him, us, and what he has accomplished in Christ.

Paul wrote the book of Ephesians this as a circulatory letter to the church in Ephesus, intending it to be distributed to other churches throughout Asia Minor (present day Turkey). Thus it's a general letter about the truth of the gospel and how we should live in light of it.



1: EPHESIANS 1:1-2

September 11, 2016

Ephesians is a circulatory letter Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, intending for the Ephesians to pass it around to other churches in the area. Rather than focusing on specific needs at Ephesus, this letter focuses on two broader topics: what God has done in Christ and who we are in Christ.

Ephesians 1:1-14 is a long introduction to these topics, covering multiple facets in the span of a short section (technically verses 3-14 are one long sentence in the Greek) and packing in tons of references to the ways God has blessed us in Christ and adopted us as his children. God has reshaped our identities in Christ ultimately “to the praise of his glorious grace.”

Understanding

- **Read Ephesians 1:1-14**
- **What statements here are tied to phrases like “in Christ”?**
- **Look at verse 5. How does being adopted by God change your identity?**

Evaluating

- **What does it mean for us to call God our Father?**
- **In what ways do you struggle seeing God as your Father?**
- **What does this passage tell us about how God feels towards us?**

Applying

- **According to this passage, why does God make us his children?**
- **How does being a child of God change the way we relate to others?**



2: EPHESIANS 1:3-6

September 18, 2016

Here Paul is beginning his introductory discourse that will run from verse 3 to verse 14, which is technically one long sentence in the original Greek. The primary focus of the whole sentence is how God has initiated and accomplished cosmic reconciliation in Christ, to the praise of his glory.

In verses 3-6 Paul starts by talking about our adoption as children of God. He returns twice to the concept of predestination, that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. These statements are framed by verse 3 and verse 6 with language about how blessed God is for doing these things. Though we might have a hard time with predestination as a concept, we're meant to read these comments about God's sovereignty and rejoice in how he has blessed us in Christ by adopting us. Additionally, the use of the word "sons" is meant to indicate our position with God as heirs and our inheritance of the promise of eternal life, which Paul will return to in verse 11.

Understanding

- **Read all of Ephesians 1:3-14.**
- **Based on this section, how has God blessed us in Christ?**
- **How does this section describe the way God feels towards us?**

Evaluating

- **Look at verse 5. What do you find difficult about predestination?**
- **Look at verse 4. Why did God choose us?**
- **How do you feel about being a child of God?**

Applying

- **What do we gain by being adopted as children of God?**
- **What does it mean to live as a child of God in your day-to-day?**



3: EPHESIANS 1:7-10

September 25, 2016

This section focuses on what God has accomplished and is accomplishing in Christ. It proceeds out of Paul's comment in verse 6, "to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved." Paul begins in verse 7 to elaborate on the blessing that we have received in Christ: redemption. He explains what exactly redemption is: the forgiveness of our sins according to God's grace. Note that this is past tense; it has already been accomplished.

He then expands to the overall plan of God that frames our redemption. Our individual redemption happens within the broader context of God's plan "to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." This cosmic redemption is God's ultimate accomplishment in Christ, which is still being worked out through the church and the proclamation of the gospel.

Understanding

- **Read all of Ephesians 1:3-14.**
- **What is redemption?**
- **What is the will of God that Paul mentions in verse 9?**
- **What does it mean that God has a plan to "unite all things"?**
- **Why might God want to unite all things?**

Evaluating

- **How does our redemption play into God's plan to unite all things?**
- **How does God's plan for redemption comfort you?**
- **When is it difficult for you to trust God's plan for redemption?**

Applying

- **What part do we get to play in God's plan to unite all things?**



4: EPHESIANS 1:11-14

October 2, 2016

Continuing his explanation of the blessings we've received in Christ, Paul expounds on the concept of adoption by mentioning the inheritance we have in Christ. This inheritance has been given to us by God's grace according to his sovereignty, by which he "works all things according to the counsel of his will."

It's by his sovereignty that God gives us himself in the person of the Holy Spirit, who is described here as the guarantee of our inheritance (the Greek for guarantee can also be translated as "down payment"). God has made us his possession and sealed us by his Spirit as proof of ownership.

Ultimately this is all "to the praise of his glory," and Paul calls us yet again to rejoice in what God has accomplished through Christ.

Understanding

- **Read all of Ephesians 1:3-14.**
- **What is the inheritance Paul talks about in verse 11?**
- **How does this inheritance relate back to verse 5?**

Evaluating

- **On an average day, how do you think or feel about this inheritance?**
- **Verse 11 tells us that God works all things according to the counsel of his will. How does this give you hope or assurance?**

Applying

- **Verse 13 says we are sealed by the promised Holy Spirit. Why does God give us the Holy Spirit?**
- **Look at verse 10. How does the Holy Spirit enable us to participate in God's plan for redemption?**
- **Look at verse 12. What are some ways we can strive to "be to the praise of his glory"?**



5: EPHESIANS 1:15-23

October 16, 2016

Following his long introduction about the greatness of God as displayed through his work in Jesus, Paul prays that God would give the Ephesians the knowledge of the blessings that are theirs in Christ:

- Their future hope, the resurrection.
- The riches of his (Jesus') inheritance. By this he means Jesus delighted in us enough to receive us as an inheritance from his Father.
- The greatness of God's power towards those who believe.

That power is proven in God raising Jesus from the dead, whom he seated in a position of authority over all things, including the church, "the fullness of him who fills all in all." The church is the full representation of Christ on earth as his body, and represents him to the rest of humanity (a sobering thought).

Understanding

- **Read Ephesians 1:15-23**
- **What is Paul praying that the Ephesians would receive from God?**
- **Why is Paul asking God for these things for the Ephesians?**
- **Paul is praying that the Ephesians would better know the way they've been blessed by God. How does that hinge on Jesus in this section?**
- **How does this section help you better understand who Jesus is?**

Evaluating

- **In what ways do you need what Paul is asking God to give to the Ephesians?**
- **How might receiving these things from God change you?**

Applying

- **After reading this passage, where do we go from here? How does this apply to our daily life?**



6: EPHESIANS 2:1-3

October 23, 2016

This is the biblical diagnosis of our life before Christ. Paul tells us we were dead; not bad off, not sick, not sub-par, but totally and completely dead. More than that, we were disobedient because we were dead “in our trespasses.” Even more than that, we were doomed as “children of wrath,” destined for eternal punishment because of our disobedience.

If you stopped at verse 3, you’d be left helpless and hopeless. We know there’s a hope ahead if we read on: But God, being rich in mercy .. made us alive together with Christ. (Eph. 4-5) However, Ephesians 2:1-3 is meant as an absolute and unequivocal statement about your need for the intervening work of God by the death of Christ on your behalf.

And though this section describes a life pre-Christ, believers can still read this section and appreciate the gravity of the situation they were in, so they can worship God all the more for his mercy. Believers can also read this and be sobered at the thought of their unbelieving friends and family still lying dead in their trespasses.

Understanding

- **Read Ephesians 2:1-3**
- **What does Paul mean by “children of wrath”?**
- **Look at verse 2. What does it mean that we were “following the course of this world, the prince of the power of the air”?**
- **How does Paul describe the life of a person dead in their trespasses?**

Evaluating

- **How does this section help you make sense of your life, either before or after meeting Jesus?**
- **What do you find convicting about this passage?**
- **How does this passage help you worship Jesus more?**

Applying

- **How does this make you feel about your unbelieving family and friends?**



7: EPHESIANS 2:4-10

October 30, 2016

Following the diagnosis of 2:1-3, 2:4-10 provides hope for the hopeless. The turning point happens in verse 4 with “But God.” Though we were lost without a viable hope for salvation, God stepped in as our rescuer. Paul highlights God’s merciful action twice in this section to help it hit home: “By grace you have been saved.” (2:5,8)

This section calls to mind Romans 5:8, “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Think for a second what a radical statement that is! God put his son on the cross to die for us while we were still sinners. When we read in Ephesians 2 “by grace you have been saved,” that word grace carries monumental weight. With it Paul communicates the dumbfounding, glorious notion that God would reach across the dividing chasm of human rebellion for the sake of turning his enemies into his children. For doubters and seekers, Ephesians 2:4-7 is the only banner of peace in a hostile world. For followers, truly understanding and receiving God’s immeasurable grace can continually renew you and rally you to the same standard of peace.

Understanding

- **Read Ephesians 2:4-10**
- **What are some of the themes in this passage?**
- **What did Paul mean when he said, “by grace you’ve been saved”?**
- **How is grace crucial to the message of the gospel?**

Evaluating

- **When do you struggle most to understand God’s grace?**
- **When do you feel like you need to earn or re-earn God’s favor?**

Applying

- **How does this passage give you hope in the midst of those struggles?**
- **How does this passage help you relate to your unbelieving family and friends?**



8: EPHESIANS 2:11-22

November 6, 2016

In the temple of Jerusalem there was an area called the Court of the Gentiles, where non-Jews could come and observe worshippers sacrificing to Yahweh in the inner courts. On the wall separating the outer Court of the Gentiles from the inner Court of the Jews were transcribed death threats towards any Gentile who would venture in past the wall. The message from Jew to Gentile was clear: God does not want you.

This is the exact opposite of Jesus' message. Paul, perhaps in reference to that specific wall, says that Christ has "broken down the dividing wall of hostility" between Jew and Gentile. He addresses not just physical separation but also the wall of the Mosaic Law, which both separated Gentiles from access to God and morally condemned all of mankind. Yet Christ fulfilled the requirement for mankind to follow the Mosaic law, repairing the vertical relationship between God and man, and broke down the ethno-racial divisions between Jew and Gentile, repairing the horizontal relationship between man and man. This latter aspect is a timely bit of application: in an age of deep social divisions over race, income brackets, gender, and political opinions, we follow a risen Savior who brings true peace and true unity.

Understanding

- **Read Ephesians 2:11-22**
- **What was the relationship like between Jews and Gentiles when Paul wrote this?**
- **What peace did Christ make by dying on the cross?**

Evaluating

- **Where do you see a need for peace in the world around us?**
- **How does the Gospel create unity in those areas?**
- **What divides exist in our society that you are scared or unwilling to cross?**

Applying

- **How does God equip us to be peacemakers with the Gospel?**
- **Where can you specifically be a Gospel-driven peacemaker?**



9: EPHESIANS 3:1-13

November 13, 2016

In verse 1 Paul starts along a train of thought but quickly breaks into an aside by verse 2. In this aside Paul elaborates on his specific ministry, bringing the gospel to the Gentiles, and builds on material introduced in chapter 2, that through Jesus the Gentiles have been brought into the covenantal promises that God gave to the Jews.

Paul calls this the “mystery of Christ” that was “hidden for ages in God.” This is the gospel revealed through Christ, for which Paul was a missionary and for which we are sent out to make disciples. As missionaries we take part in a monumental work: making the manifold wisdom of God known to the world through the church. (3:10) What a role to play! As big as it is, we don’t need to fear failure because in Christ we have boldness and access to God with confidence. (3:12) In this boldness we can take the gospel to everyone because God desires to draw all people to himself and to unify them into one “holy temple in the Lord,” of which “Christ Jesus himself [is] the cornerstone.” (2:21)

Understanding

- **Read Ephesians 3:1-13**
- **What does Paul mean when he says the “manifold wisdom of God” is made known through the church?**
- **Why is it important that the gospel was preached to Gentiles?**
- **How does Paul set an example of being a missionary in this passage?**

Evaluating

- **What specific roles do we get to play in proclaiming the gospel to people?**
- **In verse 9 Paul says he was meant to bring the gospel to light for everyone. Who do you find the hardest to share the gospel with?**
- **How does the gospel give you boldness and confidence in sharing the gospel with those people?**

Applying

- **How does this passage give you hope in communicating the gospel to doubters and seekers?**



10: EPHESIANS 3:14-21

November 13, 2016

As we wrap up our sermon series we turn to Ephesians 3:14-21, in which Paul summarizes much of his previous discourse by describing his prayers for the Ephesians. After talking at length in chapters 1-3 about who the Ephesians are in Christ, Paul prays that they would better know the power of God at work in them and the love of God for them.

One key aspect of this prayer is the mystery of comprehending the immeasurable love of Christ. In this familiar passage Paul talks about the infinite dimensions of Jesus' love for us, proposing that we could know something that surpasses knowledge. This is the privilege we are given in Christ, a finite human glimpse into the infinite depths of God's love for his people, and it's brought about by the power of the Spirit at work within us.

Continuing to implore the power of God, Paul concludes in 3:20-21 with a well-known prayer by blessing God for his vast ability to do more than we can even imagine. It is this infinite power that is at work within the church, which exists to spread God's renown throughout the world and through all generations.

Understanding

- **Read Ephesians 3:14-21**
- **What are some things you've learned in this sermon series through Ephesians?**
- **What are some ways you've been challenged to grow in this sermon series?**
- **Look at verse 19. What does it mean to "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge"?**
- **What does Paul say the Ephesians need to know about God's love?**

Evaluating

- **Why do we need power to understand Christ's love for us?**
- **How does this passage describe the activity of God in your inner life?**

Applying

- **Look at 3:20-21. How are you expecting God to move powerfully in your life?**
- **How does this section inform the way we pray for others?**

