
THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE IN THE BIBLE

• STUDY GUIDE •
WITH LEADER'S NOTES

EPHESIANS

THE LOVE WE LONG FOR

SCOTTY SMITH

EPHESIANS: THE LOVE WE LONG FOR

Scotty Smith

STUDY GUIDE WITH LEADER'S NOTES



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INTRODUCTION

Paul's letter to the Ephesians swings on a hinge. You can find the hinge about halfway through, near the end of chapter 3. Having explored the wonders of salvation in Christ, Paul kneels to pray that the Father would fill the Ephesians with that gospel. He asks that they “may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:18–19). This is the boundless, timeless, endless, bottomless love we all long for.

From there, Paul swings open the door, as it were, and walks into the Ephesians' daily lives. The Ephesians were the fruit of Paul's missionary work, so he realized they were living in a culture that neither knew nor understood Jesus and his life-giving message. With this in mind, he addresses topics that range from patience and contentment and industriousness to parenting and singing and sex. But he never forgets how he got there. He keeps calling the Ephesians—and us—back to the hinge. The love we long for is the *why* and the *how*, and importantly the *who*, of a believer's whole life.

Like the other small-group resources in this series, this book follows that focus. Your goal will be bigger than merely to study Paul's letter to the Ephesians. You will also be practicing the discipline Paul himself followed throughout that letter: you will be returning again and again to the gospel of Jesus to see how it fills and powers your life as a believer.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This guide will help you do this in a group study. Ephesians is written to the whole body of believers. Studying with other members of that body lets you benefit from what God is also teaching them, and it gives you encouragement as you apply what you learn.

Gospel-centered growth includes growing in awareness of your sin and in confidence that Jesus saves you in every way from that sin. Therefore, the group will be a place to share not only successes, but also sins and needs. Expect differences in how people participate. It's okay if some in the group are cheery while others are weary, if some "get it" quickly while others want to look more deeply, or if some are eager to share while others take it slowly. But because you'll be studying the Bible and praying together, also expect to "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). Expect the Spirit to work and change people—starting with you!

Each participant should have one of these study guides in order to join in reading and be able to work through the exercises during that part of the study. The study leader should read through both the lesson and the leader's notes in the back of this book before each lesson begins. Otherwise, no preparation or homework is required from any participant.

There are twelve lessons in this study guide. Each lesson will take about an hour to complete, perhaps a bit more if your group is large, and will include these elements:

BIG IDEA. This is a summary of the main point of the lesson.

BIBLE CONVERSATION. You will read a passage from Ephesians and discuss it. As the heading suggests, the Bible conversation questions are intended to spark a conversation rather than generate correct answers. In most cases, the questions will have several possible good answers and a few best answers. The leader's notes at the back of this book provide some insights, but don't just turn there for the "right answer." At times you may want to see what the notes say, but always try to answer for yourself first by thinking about the Bible passage.

ARTICLE. This is the main teaching section of the lesson, written by the book's author.

DISCUSSION. The discussion questions following the article will help you apply the teaching to your life. Again, there will be several good ways to answer each question.

EXERCISE. The exercise is a section you will complete on your own during group time. You can write in the book if that helps you, or you can just think about your responses. You will then share some of what you learned with the group. If the group is large, it may help to split up to share the results of the exercise and to pray, so that everyone has a better opportunity to participate.

WRAP-UP AND PRAYER. Prayer is a critical part of the lesson because your spiritual growth will happen through God's work in you, not by your self-effort. You will be asking him to do that good work.

Ephesians will show you the unequalled dimensions of the love you have in Jesus. Whatever temptations you face and whatever accusations hound you, Jesus is greater. Hear his gospel anew, and be encouraged.

Lesson

1

THE SO-MUCH-MORE- NESS OF THE GOSPEL

BIG IDEA

There's nothing more than the gospel, just more of the gospel.

BIBLE CONVERSATION *15 minutes*

Before you begin reading Ephesians together, have each member of the group privately answer the question below using the first word or phrase that occurs to them. You'll share your responses later.

What does God give us if we have faith in Jesus?

There are many good ways to answer that question, and the apostle Paul mentions several of them at the start of his letter to the Ephesians. Ephesus was an important city on the eastern side of the Aegean Sea in modern-day Turkey. Paul had spent two highly successful years as a missionary there (see Acts 19:1–20). He wrote the letter years later, when he was a prisoner, addressing the church plant that had grown out of his work. But he does not begin by telling about his situation, or commenting on news he's heard about the Ephesians. Rather, he starts by celebrating what God has done and is doing.

Have someone read **Ephesians 1:1–14** aloud. Then discuss the following questions as a group:

Look through Paul’s many answers to the question, *What does God give us if we have faith in Jesus?* Which of his answers are blessings you often think about, perhaps even matching your first-thought answer (which you may share now)? Which of his answers are blessings you seldom think about, and could be ways for you to enlarge your appreciation of the gospel?

In verse 3, Paul calls these “spiritual blessings.” What are some ways they are bigger or better than the material blessings you’ve also received from God?

In verse 12 and again in verse 14, Paul says these blessings are to the praise of God’s glory. It’s easy to think of living for God’s glory as a duty. What happens when you also see it as part of how you are blessed?

Now read the following article by this book’s author. Have participants read it aloud, taking turns at the paragraph breaks.

Lesson

1

ARTICLE

ASTONISHED BY THE GOSPEL

5 MINUTES

Like the Pevensie children stepping into Narnia, Prince Charming knocking on Cinderella’s door, Jean Valjean colliding with the bishop’s kindness—or my first day in Switzerland—some encounters leave us astonished, breathless, and wanting more. Such has been my experience with the book of Ephesians.

During my last semester at the University of North Carolina, I took a class in New Testament Greek. To my great surprise, although I had struggled with Spanish, I fell in love with Greek. It didn’t hurt that I had a great teacher, no language labs, and the motivation of getting better equipped to understand God’s Word.

Earning an A also got me an invitation from my professor to spend the following summer reading through Ephesians with him. God used that slow-paced, soaking-in-every-verse study of Paul’s letter to throw the doors open on the Alps of God’s love and the beauty of his Son. I’ve been back to Switzerland nine times since my first visit. In the same way, I also keep coming back to Ephesians.

Though I was already a Christian, “marinating” my way through Ephesians highlighted how much more there is of the gospel to

understand and experience. I still believe this is true, fifty years into knowing Jesus. There's nothing more than the gospel, just more of it. This is clearly demonstrated in the first fourteen verses of Paul's letter.

After affirming his calling as an apostle of Jesus, Paul addresses us as saints who are "faithful in Christ Jesus." Sainthood isn't a measure of our spiritual maturity, but a revelation of God's great generosity. The word *saint* denotes one who is set apart, and we have been set apart by God for faith in Christ Jesus. The object of our faith matters most, not its size. We are faithful to the degree that we are full of faith in Christ Jesus. The gospel is a bold declaration of what God has done for us in Jesus.

This means God's "grace and peace" in verse 2 are received, not achieved. These two wonderful gifts are never reversed in the Bible. We will enjoy God's peace to the extent we experience his grace.

We sing the hymn "Amazing Grace," but what *is* truly amazing about grace? Verses 3 through 14 are one long sentence in the Greek—one magnificent run-on sentence of wonder. When I started studying this sentence in the summer of 1972, it felt like trying to stand up under the Niagara Falls of God's goodness and love. It was theology and doxology overload, and it still is.

In fact, I can't picture Paul sitting down at a desk to compose these introductory words to Ephesians. I imagine him pacing about the room, eyes wide open, arms extended heavenward as his stenographer strained to record everything that was flowing from his grace-flooded heart.

Joyfully trinitarian, Paul was a worshiper before he was a worker or writer. In this opening section of Ephesians, he adores the personhood of our God as he proclaims the propositions of our faith:

The Father is the origin of every good gift we receive. The Son is the basis and realm in which God blesses us. The Holy Spirit seals us, applies the gospel to our hearts, and guarantees our inheritance. God's grace claims our past, present, future, and forever.

The past blessing of election (vv. 3–6). Far from being confused, embarrassed, or chagrined about the notion of election, Paul celebrates the good news that we are chosen people, not choice people. From beginning to end, our salvation is entirely a work of God on our behalf. We didn't show potential; God showered mercy. Christians who understand God's electing grace should be the most humble and attractive believers in any community. For election is unto holiness and blamelessness before God (v. 6), not arrogance before men.

The present riches of redemption (vv. 5–8). Paul doesn't give us an exhaustive catalogue of the riches of grace. Rather, like the overture of a great symphony, he introduces main themes he will develop in the remainder of his letter. Notice how he begins with adoption, for there is no greater blessing than to be God's daughters and sons. Through Jesus's finished work and our union with him, every Christian enjoys the legal rights and personal delights of God's children. In the Beloved, we are loved—for Jesus is our substitute to trust before he is our model to follow. By Jesus's perfect life and sacrificial death, we are also redeemed (bought back by God, for God), forgiven (of all sins—past, present, and future), and lavishly enriched with grace.

The future hope of restoration (vv. 9–11). Indeed, every promise God has made finds its "Yes!" in Jesus, and God's promises are both personal and cosmic. The gospel isn't primarily about us going to heaven when we die, but about heaven coming to earth after death is destroyed. Our Father *will* bring to completion every good thing he has begun in us and in his creation. At the right time,

God sent Jesus as the sacrifice for our sins. In the fullness of time he will send him back to finish making all things new. Until then, sonship and heirship define us, and we are certain that God is at work in all things to accomplish his redemptive purposes in Jesus.

The forever blessing of worship (vv. 12–14). How are gospel-redeemed, grace-enriched, believers to live? As Paul states in verse 12, “to the praise of his glory”—a phrase he repeats twice in three verses. Every aspect of our lives is to declare God’s glory, grace, and goodness. Like Paul, we too are to be worshipers before we are workers—now and forever. The rest of Ephesians will show us why and how to live this way.

DISCUSSION *15 minutes*

Think of all you’ve learned about God in your lifetime. What has been your high point? Tell why it’s a truth you love and keep coming back to.

In your life, what does it look like for you to be a worshiper of God first, before being a worker for him? How might this affect *how* you work for God?

Lesson

1

EXERCISE

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE, AND FOREVER

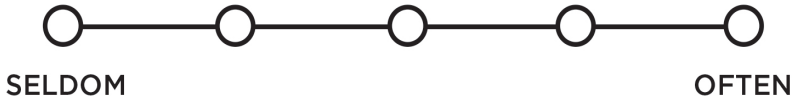
15 minutes

As you saw in the article, one way to keep a big view of the gospel is to think of it in terms of past, present, future, and forever blessings for those who believe in Jesus. (God's blessings are so full that those categories often overlap, but they are still a helpful framework.)

Begin this exercise by working on your own. For each category, read through the list of blessings Paul mentions. Rate yourself on how often you tend to remember and appreciate those blessings. If you can think of a specific way your behavior might change if you lived with more awareness of those blessings, note that also. Don't feel you need an answer for every blank, but answer where you can. After a few minutes, you'll have a chance to share some of your findings with the group.

PAST GOSPEL BLESSINGS

- God chose me before the foundation of the world.
- God planned for me to become holy.
- God chose me to be considered blameless in his sight.
- God created me with the purpose of becoming his adopted child.
- Jesus redeemed me at the cross (bought me back to belong to him).

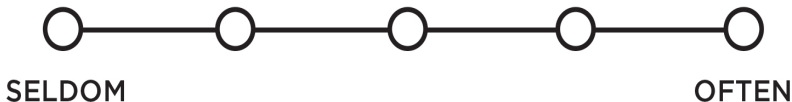


I believe and enjoy these blessings:

If I believed and enjoyed these past gospel blessings more often, I might _____.

PRESENT GOSPEL BLESSINGS

- All my sins are completely forgiven.
- I am an adopted child of God today, enjoying all those legal rights and personal delights.
- My Father lavishes grace on me, constantly helping me more than I deserve.
- By grace I am growing in wisdom, insight, and understanding of the mysteries of God's will.

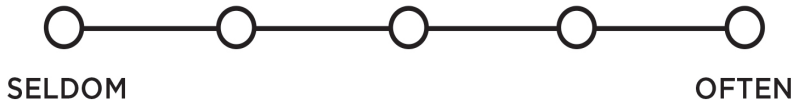


I believe and enjoy these blessings:

If I believed and enjoyed these present gospel blessings more often, I might _____.

FUTURE GOSPEL BLESSINGS

- I have an honored place in the future of heaven and earth, when God will make all things new and good again.
- God plans to complete his renewing work in me—this is my destiny.
- I will live with God to the praise of his glory.
- I will fully receive my inheritance as God's child.

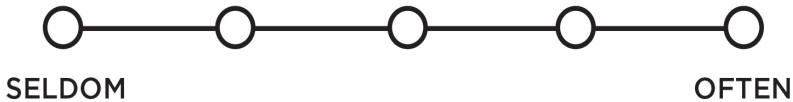


I believe and enjoy these blessings:

If I believed and enjoyed these future gospel blessings more often, I might _____.

FOREVER GOSPEL BLESSINGS

- My entire existence serves to glorify God, who works everything to fulfill his will for me.
- By giving me the Holy Spirit, my Father has kept all his promises to me and guarantees that he will continue to do so.
- Now and forever, I praise God who is most glorious.



I believe and enjoy these blessings:

If I believed and enjoyed these forever gospel blessings more often, I might _____.

Once everyone has had a chance to answer for themselves, share some of your findings with the group. What do you find interesting? How would you like to grow?

WRAP-UP AND PRAYER *10 minutes*

If you want more joy in the gospel, a great way to start seeking that joy is to ask your Father to give it to you. Be sure to include such requests as part of your closing prayer time together.