

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

**Leaders' Notes for
Central Focus and Home Groups**

2004/5

by

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STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

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STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Ephesians 1:1-10

Introductory Comments

Remember that the most important thing you can do in preparing to lead a Bible study on Ephesians 1:1-10 is not to read these notes, or a commentary, or even to come to a SLOB group. The most helpful thing to do is pray, read Ephesians, and think. Say it like a mantra three times a day: “Pray, read Ephesians, and think”. It’s not that I’m averse to using aids to study, but “pray, read Ephesians, and think” is the practical outworking of an evangelical doctrine of Scripture. Remember that famous verse from 2 Timothy 3? Do you believe it? *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the Central Focus and Homegroup leader may be competent, equipped for every Bible Study.”* Or something like that.

These notes will not provide a comprehensive commentary on Ephesians 1:1-10. For that you need to read O’ Brien’s excellent commentary published by Apollos. But the idea is to have a few salient points on one side of A4 to help you as you prepare. You may disagree with my theme sentence or application some weeks. That’s fine, as long as you’ve thought about it. We must all give an account of our own teaching before the Lord (James 3:1) and the excuse “I was only following orders” will not be compelling on that day! However, please do chat to me or your SLOB group leader if you disagree on a major point of teaching: if one of us is wrong, then we need to be corrected. Sometimes these notes might be too vague for your liking. Rest assured that is probably a deliberate ploy to provoke you into thinking more about it for yourself...!

Suggested Summary

Praise God that he has blessed us with every kind of spiritual blessing in Christ, making us part of his cosmic strategy.

The Purpose

The purpose of this study is not to get us caught up with lots of details (of which there are many), or sidetracked into doctrinal discussions (which would be easy, from any of these verses). Since Paul is praising God here (verses 3 and 6; see verses 12 and 14 too) and giving us reasons to do that, we should all go away from the study itself praising God rather than scratching our heads or arguing about interpretation. Try to make sure that however you lead the study you aim for that throughout.

The Details

1-2 No need to spend too much time in these verses. I will deal with the textual variant in verse 1 at the introductory evening (the fact that “in Ephesus” isn’t mentioned in all the early manuscripts). Interesting that “the will of God” gets an early mention.

3 Note that “every” doesn’t mean “every single one” but “every kind of” (the Greek excludes the first idea). But it’s only worth mentioning that if someone gets the wrong end of the stick and thinks it means we have every single spiritual gift it’s possible to have. The point is that the blessings in view here are specified in verses 4-14.

4-5 Remember, don’t get caught up in long debates about predestination. It is meant to make us go “wow – praise God” rather than “Hmm, I don’t get that, how does it work with free will etc.”. Note that we are chosen to “be holy and blameless”; this doctrine of election doesn’t give us an excuse to sin but is an incentive to live up to what we are in Christ. We are adopted sons and daughters of God (*adopted*, not by nature) which is an incentive to act like it.

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7 Redemption and forgiveness are here equivalents, not two completely different things. Do you know what these words actually mean? Or are they just jargon we assume everyone understands?

9-10 The mystery is not a secret anymore! It has been revealed. This is further expounded in 3:1-6 of course. The plan in verse 10 is the key to the book in many ways. Spend some time on that. All things in heaven and on earth united in Jesus one day. Much of the plan has been achieved already according to the next two chapters, but we still await its final completion.

Note the progression from eternity (v.4) to history (v.7) to future (v.10). Note also the Trinitarian progression from focusing on the Father (v.3) to Son (v.7) to Spirit in verse 13. Note the “in him” repetition throughout the chapter so far, which leaves us wondering, “if all the blessings here are “in Christ”, how do we get “in” Christ?” That’s what verses 11-14 will tell us next week...

Suggestions for Leading

As a “way in”, after you have learned each other’s names and favourite TV shows, you could ask people to say how their summer was (briefly) and what they have thanked God for recently. Then when you start the study itself, you can ask them to recall those things and then ask them to contrast them with the things mentioned in the passage as causes for thanksgiving. You don’t want to make them feel too guilty though, if all their thanks earlier were for material or “this worldly” things!

You could make a list on a piece of paper of all the blessings mentioned here, and then spend the prayer time thanking and praising God for those things. It might sound like a “chocolate box” approach, just picking out the toffee cream (predestination?) or strawberry fondant (forgiveness?) that you like most, but maybe the point is not to get too caught up in the grammatical niceties of how each verse and sub-clause fits together?

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Ephesians 1:11-14

Introductory Comments

Remember: “Pray, read Ephesians, and think”. *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the Central Focus and Homegroup leader may be competent, equipped for every Bible Study.”*

It's easy to let application get squeezed out of a Bible study. We can spend all our time unpacking the details of a text or zeroing in on what the theme sentence might be, especially since we often sweat blood with such things ourselves in preparation for the study. But it is vital in the actual Bible study to talk not about our struggles in prep but about the impact a text has on us, in our thinking, our speaking, and our doing. Application doesn't need to be left to the end, of course. Many times it is better to apply as we go. So no lectures! Think: what's the point of all this for our group?

Suggested Summary

Praise God that he has made us part of his cosmic strategy through believing the gospel.

The Purpose

We are still in “praise mode” here, since verses 3-14 is actually one long sentence giving us reasons to praise God (verses 3, 6, 12, 14). So again we should all go away from the study itself praising God. Specifically, we should be praising him for the gospel through which we have been included in God's plan for the world, a plan that will come to completion “in the fullness of time” (v.10) and when “God redeems his possession” (verse 14 footnote).

The Details

11-12 “We have obtained an inheritance” is actually “we have been made an inheritance”, i.e. we are God's inheritance. The “we” here probably refers to the same people as verse 12 “we who were the first to hope in Christ”, i.e. Jewish Christians as contrasted with Gentiles like the Ephesians (verse 13, “you also...”). But we Gentiles are God's possession too, of course (see v.13). Reassuringly God, who had a plan from eternity past (v.4) has the power to work out his designs so that everything turns out according to plan.

13 If you follow the sentence construction carefully, you'll see that the thrust is “you also were sealed with the Spirit.” It's a tricky sentence, but the bit in the middle basically asserts that we were sealed when we heard and believed the gospel. To be sealed is a sign of ownership: we are God's possession, marked out as such by having the Spirit within us.

14 The Spirit is the initial down-payment on our inheritance, a first instalment that guarantees the rest. The footnote in the ESV for this verse arises because the Greek says literally, “until the redemption of the possession”. NIV reads it as “until we (as God's possession) are finally redeemed” thus picking up on the fact that in verse 11 we are God's inheritance. ESV reads it as taking up the immediately preceding thought that we are getting an inheritance one day. Either way, there is a day of redemption (see 4:30) and it's difficult to make a decision between these two readings. Both are true – we are God's inheritance, and we ourselves also have an inheritance. Both will be fully realized on redemption day. * We can't make a Trinitarian point out of “who” at the start of the verse – it is *not* a proof of the personhood of Holy Spirit. In Greek it is a neuter

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relative pronoun (“which”) not a masculine one (“who”) because the word for Spirit is also neuter. Although some manuscripts have a masculine pronoun here, it is probably because “guarantee/down-payment” is masculine not because the Spirit is. All the same, he *is* a person not an “it” (that point is just best made from elsewhere).

Note the progression from eternity (v.4) to history (v.7) to future (v.10) is repeated here with eternity (v.11) to history (v.12-13) to future (v.14). Note also the Trinitarian progression from focusing on the Father (v.3) to the Son (v.7) to the Spirit in verse 13. Note the “in him” repetition throughout 3-14 as a whole. Note finally the focus on *God’s* glory throughout: verses 3, 6, 12, 14. This reminds us that God is sovereign in our salvation, not us, and so naturally he deserves all the credit. It was *his* plan from start to finish (see all the vocabulary of planning: his will, his purpose, the counsel of his will) but, praise God, we are included in it.

Suggestions for Leading

You should spend a little time recapping on verses 3-10 to pick up the flow of things. But not too long that you have to squash this week’s study. It is good to spend some time on the things above which run through the whole of 1:3-14 if you didn’t do that last week. There is much scope for applications around the theme of the gospel being the way we are included in Christ: how does this impact the way we think about evangelism and people becoming Christians for instance? There are also applications to the way we think about the Spirit: he is clearly not a second blessing but a blessing given to all Christians when they hear the gospel. If we do not have the Spirit we are not sealed and possessed by God, so we won’t be part of his possession when Redemption Day arrives (or we won’t receive an inheritance when Redemption Day arrives). This could be helpful for members of the group to discuss.

If you are a new group, it could be useful to talk briefly about when each of you first came to be included in Christ (or just a few of you), but you must beware of allowing that to take too long. It’s certainly something to thank God for in the prayer time. Alternatively, there’s a “what are you looking forward to?” way in, that leads to “Redemption Day”.

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Ephesians 1:15-23

Introductory Comments

Remember: "Pray, read Ephesians, and think"... It really is the key to a good Bible study.

Just as it is easy to let application get squeezed out of a Bible study, so it is also easy to inch out prayer. Several ideas were suggested at the leaders' training weekend to prevent this from happening. You could take prayer requests at the start of the evening, and then the study applies itself to where people actually are as you go, and also reminds you to pray at the end. You could pause after each major point, and "pray it in" before moving onto the next one. You could spend 5 minutes just praying things out of the passage for each other, and then after that pray for each other's secondary needs. You could set your watch alarm to go off at 9pm to remind you to stop the study and get on with praying. You could prepare a deliberately short study so that there's definitely time to pray. Whatever you do, don't let your bad organisation stop the group from responding to God and expressing their dependence on him in prayer. Why not try something new to see if it helps get your group praying more this week? Especially since we are actually studying Paul's prayer...!

Suggested Summary

Paul tells the Ephesians that he's praying for them to know God better... (can you sharpen that up more yourself?)

The Purpose

This is a prayer for people who have everything (every kind of spiritual blessing). But why did Paul write this prayer down? Was it to teach us how to pray, why to pray, and what to pray for? Was it to teach us some doctrine in the content of the prayer? Was it all of the above? Our study should have a similar purpose and effect – it should help us pray with the same motivation as Paul, encourage us to pray the same kind of thing he prays, and also teach us something.

The Details

15-16 "For this reason..." looks back to verses 3-14. He prays for them because they've been included in God's plan. He thanks God for their vertical relationship (faith in Christ) and horizontal ones (love for all the saints), which are evidence that they truly have been included in the plan. They have faith in Christ the head and love for the saints being brought together under him. Do we thank God in our prayers when we see these things in others, or just take them for granted? Worth pausing just to check everyone is clear that "saints" does not mean special dead Christians (St. Paul, St. Anthony), but *all* Christians: we are all saints (St. Lee, St. Kerry etc)!

17 This verse tells us what Paul is actually praying for: a spirit of wisdom and revelation or *The Spirit* of wisdom and revelation. That means either a spiritual disposition of openness to what God has revealed, and insight into it; or a specific work of the Holy Spirit giving them insight and revealing things to them. Either way, the end result is that that they know God personally in increasing intimacy (see the parallel passage in Colossians 1:10 and the work of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 2:10-16). Note it is not just to know things about God, but to know *him*. Knowing things about him is part of that, but what Paul is after is relational not theoretical knowledge - the kind of knowledge we need to pray for God's help to acquire, not just factual Bible knowledge anyone can pick up.

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18 Your heart has eyes!? Bizarre image... We were enlightened when we became Christians, and we continue to be enlightened as we grow in our knowledge of God. Note that it is about our hearts – not our emotions only, but our whole being (“heart” is the Bible word for our intellectual and moral “control centre” whereas emotions are more often felt in the stomach – they are “gut” feelings).

18-19 There are three things we will know if we know God better. It will give us *hope* - not wishful thinking, but a confident expectation based on the fact that God has *called* us out to be part of his plan. The *inheritance* is not ours, but *God's* – in other words we are to understand how precious we are to God, since we are his inheritance (see v.14). Finally, knowing God better means grasping how great his power is, and that it is available to us as believers in the gospel (and is at work “in” us, see 3:20). In essence it is a prayer that the blessings of 1:3-14 would “sink in” and make us more confident and assured as Christians, as we stand firm.

20-23 These verses expand on God's power, and illustrate how powerful he is. But they are not just a random example – they are “very Ephesians” because they reflect a central concern of the letter: that Christ is exalted as head. If asked to give an example of God's power we might have mentioned creation, or miracles of healing, or the calming of the storm perhaps. But Paul has a different illustration of God's power, and there's a good reason why. All things are being brought together *under* Christ (1:10), so first we are told here that he is higher than all things. The examples of God's power used here are: Christ's resurrection, and his being seated with God in the heavenly realms as the supreme ruler over everything. And amazingly, it is the power which accomplished that exaltation which is at work in *us*! There are lots of details we could get lost in here (how is the church Christ's body? how does he fill all things? etc.). Try to stick to the main point, that verses 20-23 give us an illustration of God's power at work in and for us.

Looking back over the whole of chapter 1, it is very clear that Jesus Christ is a very important person in Paul's mind! Look back at the height (Christ is exalted over all) and breadth (all things are encompassed in his plan) and length (God's plan is from eternity past to eternity future). Paul is certainly trying to raise our spirits by raising our thoughts out of the mundane trivialities of this world. Has that emphasis in Ephesians so far changed the way we think and act in our daily lives? Do we realise we are part of something so big? And are we praying, as he does, to know and experience these great blessings more and more?

Suggestions for Leading

Don't forget to pray together at the start of the study (before reading the passage) that you would understand what God is saying to us this week through his word. We are dependent on him to teach us, so let's express that in humble prayer.

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Ephesians 2:1-10

Introductory Comments

Remember: "Pray, read Ephesians, and think." It really is the key to a good Bible study – better than reading these notes!

Main Point

When you were spiritually dead, God made you alive by grace alone, through faith alone, for his glory alone.

The Purpose

Why did Paul write this bit? What did he want the Ephesians to feel and think and do as a result of hearing it? Make sure you spend some time thinking about this to make sure your aim in studying this passage together is the same as Paul's aim in writing it. Pondering purpose is the acme of application, you might say...

The Details

1-2 Verse 1 is the main point of verses 1-3: you were dead. Verses 2-3 unpack what it means to be one of the living dead. Although dead, we were still capable of walking says verse 2. In our "walk of shame" (to borrow a phrase from Anne Robinson on *The Weakest Link*) we followed the **world**, i.e. were motivated entirely by worldly concerns and lived in accordance with worldly values. We also followed the **devil**, called here the "*prince/ruler of the power of the air*" (see 2 Cor 4:4 for possibly another roundabout way of referring to him). That means we did his bidding and followed his agenda. The rest of v.2 probably means that he was at work *in* us: prompting us, using us, moulding us. Do we really believe this of our pre-Christian selves? And of our non-Christian friends?

3 And finally, to complete the trio of evil, we also followed (or "*carried out the desires of*") the **flesh**, our sinful nature which includes our sinful thoughts ("*and the mind*") bent on finding ways to gratify our self-indulgent desires. Such behaviour alone would kindle God's anger, but we were in fact "*children of wrath*" by our very nature inherited from Adam and Eve, as well as being quite willing "*sons of disobedience*" (v.2). We who are now saved were no different to "*the rest of mankind*" – there was nothing special about us to mark us out from the crowd. We tend not to think we were that bad before we became Christians, but Paul is very clear.

4 This is the hinge on which this passage turns. Despite our desperate situation and rebellion (which endangered God's plan to unite all things in Christ), God stepped in. For two reasons: first because he's rich in mercy. Second because he loved us greatly. Note that it relies on God stepping in to do something not us "coming to our senses" or deciding to change or resolving to live differently. We couldn't spiritually do any of those things because we were dead. And the thing one usually notices about dead people is that they cannot respond to anything or *do* anything. We didn't look like promising candidates, but God saved us anyway.

5-6 These verses tell us what God has done to save us. He didn't wait until we made the first move, he acted "*even when we were dead*" (see Romans 5:8 "*while we were still sinners...*"). The remedy for spiritual death is that he "*made us alive*". He also raised us and seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms; in fact, whatever he did for Christ in 1:20, he also did for us spiritually. Since we are united with Christ (the phrase "*in him*" is often repeated throughout the letter) our place in heaven is as secure as his. The

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emphasis is on us being made alive *together with Christ*, raised up *together with him*, and seated *together with him* in the heavenly realms. It all depends on being in him. So no wonder Paul suddenly exclaims, “*By grace you have been saved!*” (v.5) while he’s telling us all this. It had to be by grace, because dead people cannot make themselves alive, raise themselves up, or sit down!

7 This verse is often neglected when studying this passage. It tells us the *purpose* of the preceding verses (that’s why it starts with “*so that...*”) and the ultimate reason: God saved us so that he could forever show off how gracious and kind he is, even to sinners like those described in verses 1-3. In other words, saving even us means he can boast for all eternity about how merciful he is. As 1:6 put it, it was all “*for the praise of his glorious grace.*” God alone gets the glory for it all – and that’s great for us because he wants to be known as a God who saves even his enemies, which is what we were. This is quite a change of perspective for many people!

8-9 These verses are a wonderful summary of the gospel, worthy of being memorised by our groups (see below). They reiterate a key theme of the passage so far – that our salvation in Christ was all God’s doing. Note that “*faith*” is not a good work we do in response to God’s grace. It is explicitly opposed to “*works*”. Rather, faith is the way we receive God’s grace, the open hand which receives the gift if you like. Note that verse 8b means that all of v.8a is a gift of God, not just our faith. [Although it is true to say that our faith is given to us by God: see e.g. 1 Peter 1:1, Phil 1:29, Acts 14:27, Acts 18:27. It is also implied from the fact that before God makes us alive we are spiritually dead and cannot respond or take any spiritual action – therefore we need God to give us faith, to give us the ability to open our hands to receive his gift]. If there was any hint that we contributed something to the process of our salvation (whether a good work, a good background, or good potential) then when we get to heaven we can boast, “I’m here because I had faith,” or “because I gave to charity” or “because I went to St. Helen’s.” No-one boasts in heaven except God (see verse 7).

10 In 1:4 it would be tempting to conclude that being chosen by God means we don’t have to be holy; hence Paul says we were chosen in order to be holy and blameless before God. Here in 2:1-10, the temptation is to think that if we’re saved by grace not works then doing good works is not important. So Paul mentions good works to remind us we must walk in them (coming back to the “*walking*” metaphor for living as in verse 2) now that we are saved. In fact, that’s why we were saved: God has prepared in advance many good works for us to do as Christians. He thinks of everything! He will elaborate on what these works are in chapters 4-6.

Suggestions for Leading

Why not consider memorising Ephesians 2:8-9 together? Read it out loud together a few times with the Bibles open, and then try doing it with the Bibles shut. See if people can write it down without looking at the Bible. Test each other on Sunday and next week. It’s a great way to meditate on Scripture by storing up God’s word in our hearts (Psalm 119:11).

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Ephesians 2:11-22

Main Point

By the cross, Christ has reconciled both Jews and Gentiles to God, and to one another, as his united household.

The Purpose

The purpose of this passage is given to us in verse 11. Paul actually tells us directly what he wants us to do with the information he's about to impart: he wants us to "remember" it, i.e. not forget the change in our status as Gentiles. Therefore the purpose of our study is to ensure we know the truth being taught and do not forget it, which means appreciating it, being grateful for it, and actively enjoying and revelling in it. Practical / concrete applications of this "doctrine" are going to be expounded in chapters 4-6. It could also be said that if 2:1-10 is about us as individuals, 2:11-22 forces us to think in the plural, to think "corporately" about a household or a structure, or (you might say) a church.

The Details

11-12 As with 2:1-3, this section begins with the bad news, before a big "*but*" in verse 13. The bad news of our estrangement from God is encapsulated in verse 11 with reference to the big symbol of Jewishness (for men at least!): circumcision. When Paul writes, "*circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands*" he's hinting at the fact that the real division between people is spiritual not physical (see Romans 2:28-29 for that same thought in a more developed way). Verse 12 expands the ways in which Gentiles were "uncircumcised" spiritually in terms of their alienation, separation, and hopelessness. Thus Gentiles were divided from God and divided from Jews. It is easy to forget that most of *us* are Gentiles, and that we are only allowed into God's plan now that Jesus has come. Previously, things looked very bleak for us – we mustn't forget that!

13 So much for the bad news – "*But now...*" the good news! To be near to God is an Old Testament way of referring to a special relationship with God or being in his presence (see for instance Exodus 19:22; Leviticus 9:5; Numbers 16:10). That is what we Gentiles now have because of the blood (the death) of Christ, an allusion to the killing of animals and the use of their blood in the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, which was necessary if the priests were to "draw near" to God (see Ezek. 44:15 for the link).

14 Paul shifts from addressing the alienation of Gentiles from God to the rift between us and the Jews. He describes the change in our relationship as going from "*hostility*" to "*peace*." This peace is a necessary part of the uniting of all things in Christ (1:10). On the cross Christ broke down the barriers between believing Jews and believing Gentiles. The *dividing wall of hostility* is therefore most likely to be metaphorical, rather than a literal wall in the physical temple in Jerusalem separating Jews and Gentiles (a wall which Christ did not literally demolish "*in his flesh*"). That physical wall was, however, a powerful symbol of this spiritual separation: Jews were separated from Gentiles, even while both were separated from God. Now in Christ the wall between Jew & Gentile is smashed.

15 The word translated "abolishing" doesn't mean that Christ has made the Old Testament entirely useless for us, or that it should be torn out of our Bibles (see

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Ephesians 6:2 for instance!). The particular issue in view is the way the Old Testament Law created the division between Jews and Gentiles. So in his death, Christ makes it of no effect, he nullifies it, renders it ineffective, and takes away its divisive sting. So now, rather than Jews and Gentiles being two different subsections of God's people, Christ makes us both one. So there are now three types of people: Jews, Gentiles, and Christians. Christians could be physically "*Gentiles in the flesh*" or physically Jews with a literal circumcision (v.11-12). But we are now distinct from spiritual Jews (those Jews who reject Jesus) and spiritual Gentiles (who also reject Jesus and live in an "un-Christian" way according to Ephesians 4:17). For this threefold division of humanity, see also 1 Corinthians 10:32 (with "Greeks" meaning Gentiles). The point is that in Christ, since the divisive law is nullified, believing Jews and believing Gentiles are a new *united* entity, "*one new man*" rather than two different kinds of Christians.

16-17 This new entity is reconciled to God as a new entity - a new, single, united "*one body*." There is therefore no hostility, division, or separation between Jews and Gentiles who are Christians. All had the gospel of peace preached to them whether they were near to God already (Jews) or far away (Gentiles).

18 An amazingly Trinitarian verse (as is verse 22). Through Jesus Christ we both (Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles) have access to God the Father in one Holy Spirit. So nearness or access to God no longer depends on Jewishness (especially symbolised by circumcision, v.11) but on being part of the new entity in Christ. Note that it was the Spirit who sealed us into Christ in the first place (1:13).

19-22 Returning to the idea of division which he brought up in verses 11-12, Paul summarises the change brought about now that Jesus has come. We are "*no longer*" strangers and aliens (see verse 12 "*alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants*"). Instead we are fellow citizens with the saints (indeed, according to 1:1 we *are ourselves* now saints) and are part of the "*household of God*". This might also be called the church (as in 1:22 or 3:10), but that word means a gathering of people whereas sticking with the house/building metaphor, Paul can now refer to the "*foundation*" and "*cornerstone*" of this new temple in which God can live. The people of God are built on the fundamentals of God's word, with Christ himself holding us together.

Suggestions for Leading

It's important at this stage that we also don't forget how Ephesians as a whole is panning out. The main thrust of the letter is encapsulated in 1:10 – God's plan is to unite all things in Christ. This passage is intimately related to that plan: if all things are to be united in him, Christ must somehow unite Jews and Gentiles to each other. But they must also both be reconciled to God, which 2:11-22 also talks about. Make sure you don't "lose the plot", the main storyline of the book by focusing only on the details. References back to earlier passages will help prevent each paragraph we study week-by-week from becoming disconnected, and give us a sense of a developing big picture.

Did you memorise Ephesians 2:8-9 as a group last week? If so, test each other and see if you can remember it all!

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Ephesians 3:1-13

Main Point

Paul explains his part in God's plan as apostle to the Gentiles and revealer of the mystery of Gentile inclusion.

The Purpose

Paul actually tells us the purpose of this section in verse 13. He is asking them not to lose heart because of his sufferings on their behalf. Why is he suffering? Because he's in prison (3:1 and 4:1). Why is it "for you" (verse 13) and ("on behalf of you Gentiles")? Because he was persecuted by the Jews, explicitly for his preaching of a gospel which included Gentiles in the plan of God on the same basis as Jews. That was the glory of 2:11-22. In Acts 9:15-16 Paul is commissioned specifically as apostle to the Gentiles and told he will suffer because of it. In Acts 13:50, 14:2, 19, 15:2, 17:5, 13, 18:6, 12, 19:9, 21:27-31, 23:12 etc. mention is made of "the Jews" persecuting and trying to kill him. Acts 23:27-30 makes it clear that Paul ends up in prison because the unbelieving Jews were after him. As Gentiles (primarily) Paul was therefore in prison because of people like the Ephesians, since he was preaching that they could be included in God's plan by believing in Jesus, quite apart from circumcision, Sabbath laws, and food rituals.

But why would they be tempted to "lose heart" (verse 13)? Since "their" apostle was mistreated and put in prison by the religious establishment, the Ephesians may have worried that perhaps Paul was not telling the truth about their inclusion, or that he was not accurate in his theological understanding, which would mean they weren't part of it at all and didn't really have such glorious riches or hope. So Paul here in 3:1-13 explains his part in God's plan, in order to encourage them that even though he's in prison, that shouldn't be a cause of despair or doubt for them.

The Details

1-3 Paul seems to start a sentence here which he doesn't finish until after verse 13. He is a prisoner because of his preaching to the Gentiles, hence "*on behalf of you Gentiles*". The "stewardship" given to Paul is the gospel, which was revealed to him by the Spirit ("by revelation" in verse 3 but "by the Spirit" in verse 5).

4-5 Reading Ephesians gives us insight into what was revealed to Paul. It is called a mystery, but is actually an "open secret" now. Previously it was not known ("*to the sons of men in other generations*" referring to people before Christ) but now it is revealed by the Spirit to the "*apostles and prophets*". This group of people has been mentioned before in 2:20 and will be referred to again in 4:11, always in this order. It means Paul, the other apostles, and a group of New Testament "prophets" to whom the gospel has been revealed in a foundational (cf. "*the foundation of the apostles and prophets*" in 2:20) way. They cannot be Old Testament prophets because they were certainly men of "*other generations*" to whom the mystery was explicitly not revealed, and also because in 4:11 it is clear that such people are a gift from the *risen and ascended* Lord Jesus (and I need hardly say that the resurrection and ascension did not happen until the New Testament!).

6 The mystery or open secret could be defined several ways, but Paul focuses on the aspect which has put him in jail: the mystery is that Gentiles are fellow-heirs of God's inheritance alongside Jews, fellow-members of the same body with Jews, and fellow-partakers of the promise of God along with the Jews. The prefix "fellow" added three

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times in the verse to make this point very clear: through the gospel Gentiles are fellow-everything with the Jews – part of the same plan.

7-9 Paul's place in salvation history is unique. God appointed him as "special ambassador" to the Gentiles (if you like) and gave him the important role of making God's plan known to everyone (Gentiles *and* Jews). Not because he is so great ("*though I am the very least of all the saints*", see also 1 Timothy 1:15), but because of God's "grace" (as a "gift", verse 7).

10 Through the church, that is through the "United Church of Jews and Gentiles" which as been described in 2:11-22 (especially 2:20-22) God's wisdom is displayed. What kind of wisdom? The word translated "*manifold*" literally means greatly varied or many-sided, and thus emphasises the diversity of God's wisdom and makes us think of the diversity of his people: not just Jews, but Gentiles too, and many different kinds of Gentiles it has to be said as well! The church, being a diverse group of people, displays the many-sided wisdom of God, to the spiritual forces in the heavenly realms. What happens here on earth has an impact there in the heavenlies: our unity in Christ as a church here is a testimony to the rulers and authorities there.

11-12 This is all part of God's eternal plan (note the *eternal* aspect being mentioned again after 1:4), which centres on and was achieved by Christ. It is in him that we have freedom and access to God and can boldly approach God as our Father. All because of our faith in Christ, the thing which marks out both Jews and Gentiles from this new group: Christians.

13 So Paul concludes by urging them not to be discouraged because "their" apostle is in prison. That doesn't mean the plan is a failure. We still have access to God through Christ. God's plans are bigger than one man, however important. Paul's purpose was to preach to the Gentiles and reveal God's plan. But God's plan itself was realized in Christ and still stands whatever happens to Paul.

Suggestions for Leading

It's important to realize that this section is about Paul and his place in the plan, otherwise it doesn't seem to add very much to 2:11-22. So ensure people grasp that as soon as possible. You may begin by simply focusing on what the point of this passage is (i.e. by pondering verse 13) and working your way from there through the details of the passage, rather than going from verse 1 to verse 2 to verse 3 etc. Things may click into place more for people then (or they may not!).

Did you memorise Ephesians 2:8-9 as a group a few weeks ago? If so, test each other and see if you can remember it all!

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Ephesians 3:14-21

Main Point

Helen Willcox says it is, "Paul prays they would be empowered by God to know how big Christ's love is." Pretty good!

The Purpose

Why did Paul *write* this prayer? To teach us how to pray, why to pray, and what to pray for? To teach us some doctrine in the content of the prayer? Was it all of the above? Our study should have a similar purpose and effect – it should help us pray with the same motivation as Paul, encourage us to pray the same kind of thing he prays, and also teach us something.

The Details

14 Paul resumes the thought he began in 3:1 (in that sense, all of 3:2-13 should be in brackets). The "reason" is 2:11-22, i.e. Jews and Gentiles and united into one new entity and reconciled to God by the cross, and because of this, Paul prays... In fact, he "bows the knee" to God, showing respect and submission as well as taking a posture of prayer. The prayer is addressed to God the Father, as is 1:15-23

15 This is a tricky verse. But the thrust is that God is sovereign over every family in heaven and earth, over the heavenly realms and over the earthly one too. It is to that God Paul prays. Try not to get distracted by a long discussion of possible meanings here!

16 This is the thing for which Paul asks the Father, the central petition of the prayer: please give them inward strength. Unpacking the details, he is asking a wealthy God ("*according to the riches of his glory*") and therefore more than able to answer such a prayer in abundance. The strength is imparted by God the Father "*through his Spirit*", the one who is building the Church (2:22), through whom we have access to the Father (2:18), and who seals us into Christ thus guaranteeing our inheritance (1:13).

17a This is the result of praying verse 16. Being strengthened by God through the Spirit enables Christ to dwell in our hearts. Obviously this is not literal but "*by faith*". Note that in 2:22 it was God (the Father) who dwells in us. Here it is Christ. (John 14:23 gives the same perspective on the Trinity coming to live within believers.) It is through the Spirit and by faith that this happens. It is not a prayer for conversion but for controlling; if Christ is to dwell in or be "at home" in our hearts, he will be the central figure around whom all our thoughts and motivations revolve.

17b-18 Paul further develops what it will look like for the Ephesians to be strengthened by God and to have Christ at home in their hearts. They will be rooted and grounded in love, like God's love (2:4) in which we should also walk (5:2). The purpose of Christ dwelling within us is that they will also be able to comprehend and understand the love of Christ, with all its dimensions of height and depth etc (see "*manifold wisdom of God*" in 3:10 which also reflects the new multi-faceted and varied nature of God's people). They will do this "*with all the saints*", a phrase which goes back to 2:19 and 3:6 to express the corporate togetherness of the church. If this prayer is answered, the whole church together will love one another with a Christ-like love, a love which recognises no distinction of Jew or Gentile. As one commentator puts it, "*Growth in the individual believer cannot occur in isolation but must be accomplished in context with other*

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believers. Furthermore, true growth cannot occur by association with only certain believers, ones preferred because they are of the same socio-economic, intellectual, or professional status" (Harold Hoehner, page 486). Great application!

19 To "know" the love of Christ which is enormous in breadth and length and height and depth, is to know something "*that surpasses knowledge*." No matter how much we think we know about Christ and his work, his love is actually much bigger and wider than our knowledge. This is not to downplay knowledge (something he explicitly prays for in verse 18 and emphasises elsewhere in Ephesians) but it is to recognise that Christ's love is overwhelming, beyond our ability to box and neatly package it. "To be filled with all the fullness of God" - this could be confusing. It basically summarises what it means to comprehend and know Christ's love. It means Paul wants the Ephesians themselves to be filled with the fullness of everything God wants them to be, in love and unity and maturity. It is a similar thought to that in 4:13, but note also that in one sense we already share in this fullness in 1:23.

20-21 This is a "doxology" - ascribing glory to God, as a way of praising him. It reminds us that God is able to do even more than we ask him to because he is a supremely powerful God. His power is particularly at work "*within us*", that is, within us as individuals and within us as the united church of Jews and Gentiles. It is good not just to petition God but also to praise him, and give him glory for what he has done in the church (i.e. saving spiritually dead sinners and uniting Jews and Gentiles into one body) and in Christ Jesus (whose work on the cross is what accomplished both salvation and this unification). If he can do that, then he truly can do more than anyone could ever imagine; compared to saving his enemies and uniting deadly foes into one church, anything else we might ask of God will be easy for him.

Suggestions for Leading

It is interesting to ponder the differences between this prayer and the one reported in 1:15-23. The biggest difference is that Paul has just been talking about the union of Jews and Gentiles in God's new entity, "the Church", so there is an emphasis here on the breadth of God's mercy and love which wasn't so evident before. It is important to bring out this development. Note too the pattern of Ephesians 1-3 so far: teaching followed by prayer, then teaching followed by prayer. An excellent model for us to follow in our groups. But more of that next week...

Did you memorise Ephesians 2:8-9 as a group a few weeks ago? If so, test each other and see if you can remember it all!

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Ephesians 1-3

Introductory Comments

At Central Focus we will read out the whole of Ephesians 1-6 together out loud, as we did at the start of term. Hopefully as we do so it will sound more familiar to everyone, and we will realise how much we have learned. It is a good idea to spend a bit of time at the end of term just going over the first three chapters again, to see where we have got to. We will do this not just by summarising the “argument” or development of the letter so far, but also by looking at major themes which have come to the surface in all three chapters.

Incidentally, it is always a good idea when preparing to lead a Bible study to look at the “questions to ponder” for that study. Conscientious group members have been filling in their answers each week and pondering the passage, and these questions which we produce each week should provide some kind of way into the study. The questions relating to chapters 1-3 as a whole are no different... If you haven't seen them, do look them up on www.centraalfocus.org.uk!

Summary of the Letter so far...

1:1-2 Hello!

1:3-14 Praise God that he has blessed us with every kind of spiritual blessing in Christ, making us part of his cosmic strategy through believing the gospel.

1:15-23 Prayer that we would be enlightened to know better the powerful God who raised Christ.

2:1-10 When you were spiritually dead, God made you alive by grace alone, through faith alone, for his glory alone.

2:11-22 By the cross, Christ has reconciled both Jews and Gentiles to God, and to one another, as his united household.

3:1-13 Paul has a special place in God's plan, as apostle to the Gentiles and revealer of the mystery of Gentile inclusion.

3:14-21 Prayer that they would be empowered by God to know how big Christ's love is.

Spend a few minutes on each section to recall the basic thrust of what it is all about, in order to develop an understanding of how the letter fits together.

Major Themes

What has Ephesians taught us so far about these themes? Where are they mentioned?

God the Father is our Father (1:2) and the God and Father of Jesus (1:3), source of all our blessings, he has a plan and the power to fulfil it (1:3-14, esp. 11). He is the Father of glory (1:17) who raised Christ from the dead and greatly exalted him (1:20-22). He is rich in mercy and great in love (2:4) and saves us by grace (5, 8). We are reconciled to him (2:16) by the cross and so have access to him (2:18, 3:12) who also dwells within the church (2:22). Every family is named for/by him (3:14) and so we pray to the one who is able to do more than we even imagine (3:20). How do we summarise all of this? *The Father is the gracious source of our salvation; access to him is the purpose of it.*

God the Son / Christ is our Lord/Master (1:2,3 etc) and the centre of God's plan (1:9-10, 3:11), the one to whom we are united and in whom we have every blessing (see every reference to “in him / in Christ”). He is the one we hope in (1:12) and trust in

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(1:15), who was raised from the dead to be highly exalted over everything (1:20-23). He died on the cross to bring us near to God, to end the hostility between Jew and Gentile, and to reconcile us to God (2:11-22). He is the cornerstone of the church (2:20) and dwells within our hearts by faith (3:17). His love surpasses knowledge (3:19). Summary? *Christ is the centre of God's plan and the one who makes it happen through his death. We are blessed by being in relationship with him ("in him").*

God the Spirit seals us in Christ when we believe the gospel (1:13) and guarantees our final inheritance (1:14). In "One Spirit" we have access to the Father (2:18) as he, the Spirit, builds us into a dwelling place for God (2:22). He revealed the mystery to the apostles and prophets (3:5) and strengthens believers inwardly (3:16). Summary? *The Spirit puts the Father's plan into effect and continues Christ's work, by building up the church.*

Do a similar survey of the material in Ephesians 1-3 with the following themes, and write a summary sentence:

God's power
The gospel / mystery
The future
The heavenly places

The big lesson of the first three chapters is that God has a plan to unite everything (even Jews and Gentiles) in Christ, and we are made part of this by God's grace when we believe the gospel.

There may be other (secondary) things people have learned or been struck by studying Ephesians this term. Perhaps spend some time sharing those? Whatever you do, don't forget to pray (Paul doesn't)!

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Ephesians 4:1-16

Introductory Comments

At Central Focus we will read the whole of Ephesians 1-6 together out loud again, as we did at the start and end of last term. Hopefully as we do so it will sound more familiar to everyone, and we will realise just how much we have learned. It is a good idea to spend a tiny bit of time at the beginning of the study just briefly summarising chapters 1-3.

Basically, what we are looking at in the second half of Ephesians is the application of the doctrine taught in the first half. So we may need to keep looking back at what we've learned in order to see how these next passages relate to the big plan as we have seen it develop in chapters 1-3.

The Main Point

Live out your spiritual unity created by the gospel as, equipped by Christ with word ministries, you build each other up.

Paul's Purpose

Paul wants us to recognise, rightly value, and use word ministries as divinely given "means of grace" which equip us to build each other up. Our studies should encourage us to play our part in God's plan for the church, whether as teachers or as equipped saints doing the regular work of ministry.

The Details

1 This is the hinge on which Ephesians turns. Walk worthy of the call, i.e. live out what you are in Christ. The call is not our particular "vocation" (to be a doctor, accountant, lawyer, teacher etc.) but the call to be a Christian (see 1:18, 4:4, and Romans 8:30).

2-3 This is the way to walk, but notice that the special focus of this description is on how we treat others who are also called. We are in this together, and therefore we treat each other as part of the same team, created by the Spirit to be a united team, peace having been established between us by the cross (see 2:11-22 for the theme of peace and the work of the Spirit in building the Church).

4-6 The key word here is "one", and the key thought is that all Christians share the same benefits and status together (a thought which encourages us to obey verses 1-3). In verse 6, God is the Father of all *Christians* not all people indiscriminately; this is established from pondering other references to the Father (1:3, 1:17, 2:18 etc.) and from the immediate context where none of the things he is talking about apply to unbelievers (e.g. faith, baptism). Hence the Father is the Father of us all (Christians), is over us all, through us all, and in us all (see John 14:23), which again motivates us to maintain the unity of the Spirit and live in accordance with the gospel.

7-10 Christ gave gifts to each one of us when he ascended after his death and resurrection. The Psalm 68 quote picks up the ascension of Christ mentioned before in 1:20-23, though the last clause is slightly altered from the Psalm, possibly because Paul doesn't intend the last clause to be a direct quote but a lead into his main point. Verses 9-10 are an aside which should not be allowed to take up too much time. Reference to Christ descending is *not* to any supposed descent into hell after his crucifixion (which people have sometimes seen in 1 Peter 3:18-19) but to Christ's descending *from heaven to earth* (i.e. Christmas). The main thrust there is that the victorious ascended king

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dispenses gifts to his people. Don't get lost in the extra details which may confuse and distract.

11 Paul singles out 4 gifts for special mention because of their particular role. Please refer to the discussion of "apostles and prophets" in the study notes for 3:4-5 for arguments in favour of understanding both groups as foundational *New Testament* gifts of revelation. Evangelists could be simply people who are especially gifted at evangelism in the local church, or a special class of people (like Apollos, or Barnabus perhaps) who assisted the Apostles (see also 2 Timothy 4:5). Pastors and teachers is (see ESV footnote) probably one group who shepherd the church by teaching it. The thing all four groups have in common is that they are *word* gifts, all associated with God's revelation: they are either special revealers, gifted spreaders, or regular teachers of God's word.

12 The purpose of word gifts is to equip every member of the church (whatever *their* gift might be, other gifts are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament) to do the work of ministry and build each other up. The church grows as in love we all speak the truth of the word (or "word of truth" 1:13) to one another and thereby build ourselves up as a body. The ministry is not done solely by pastor-teachers (as many church members believe!); their job is to equip everyone to be ministers (or servants) of the church.

13-16 Unity and maturity is the goal of Christ's gifting the church with word ministries. Word ministries equip us so we are able to grow up, and resist the destabilising effects of false doctrine. Our growth into Christ (or Christlikeness) is related to the main theme of Ephesians (back in 1:10) to bring everything together under him. For it to happen we need each part of the body to work properly, and for that to happen it needs to be properly equipped.

The logic of the passage is straightforward, and leads to many possible applications about the value we place on word ministries (like sermons, talks, Bible studies, one-to-ones, quiet times, etc) and the goal to which they should be orientated (the equipping of all Christians to build up and love each other). The latter cannot happen without the former. It is sometimes said "doctrine divides; love unites", but Paul says correct teaching is essential to loving unity. Do we think maturity, unity, and stability can come in some other way? Or do we tend to think of Bible study as the mere accumulation of knowledge without practical purpose, or of our small groups as "courses" we attend for personal enlightenment rather than units of support, encouragement, correction, and spiritual growth?

Suggestions for Leading

You could study verses 1-6 forwards and then look at the second half of the passage backwards, as I did in my talk on this passage at the Leaders' Weekend in September ([click here](#) for a transcript of the talk, in case your memory isn't all that vivid...). This is a little out of the ordinary and so keeps people awake, and also makes the big point about word ministry being important to the maturity of a congregation stand out.

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Ephesians 4:17 – 5:2

Introductory Comments – Application

Since Paul's attention in the second half of Ephesians has turned to applying the truths he taught us in chapters 1-3, it is vitally important that we do not turn our Bible studies into doctrinal expositions, but give plenty of time to application. This is not always easy, because we must first grasp what Paul is saying before we think about applying it to ourselves, but it is crucial that we do not squeeze application into the last 5 minutes of our time together. As always, it requires disciplined and well-organised leaders to ensure this happens, but you could always try a few tricks as well! For instance, why not apply each paragraph or section as you go, so at least by the end of the study you will have applied some of it even if you run out of time? Or work out what kinds of application will come out naturally from the passage and start the study by talking about those issues, thus feeding the passage directly into the applicatory discussion? Whatever way you do it, make sure you do not neglect to encourage each other to actually "do the word" (see James 1:22-25).

The Main Point & Purpose

The main point is: "Change your life by renewing your minds with the gospel so you live like Jesus." Paul exhorts his readers to change their lives, swapping Gentile ways for Christian ways, motivated by the gospel. We ought not to just inform people about this change of life and how it is accomplished, but encourage and exhort each other to actually do it.

The Details

4:17-19 How we used to live

17 This is a strong command, which Paul insists on with the authority of "the Lord". Gentiles is here used as a synonym for non-Christian, people whose lives are contrasted with the way of Jesus. The core problem is in their hardness of heart against God, which results in the mind or understanding becoming dark, futile, and ignorant.

19 This heart and mind disease leads to a lifestyle given over to sensuality and impurity. Obviously on the outside unbelievers are not all "wildly immoral", but Paul is looking into the nucleus of their spiritual condition and exposing the drift and direction of their lives.

4:21-24 How we learned to be different

20-21 The big difference between the Gentile way of life and the Christian way of life is learning Christ, hearing about him and being taught the truth (see 1:13, 4:15, 6:14). Lifestyle is intimately connected to what we have learned and how we think.

22-24 What we were specifically taught as Christians to do was to put off our old selves, our former way of life, which was corrupt and full not just of bad actions but of desires which are in themselves deceitful. We put off the old self by having our minds renewed ("the spirit of your mind" means the disposition of your mind or the attitude of your mind). It is the truth that is in Jesus which renews our minds, the gospel as Paul has outlined it in the rest of Ephesians. Having put off one set of cloths we put on another – a new lifestyle which makes us like God because it is characterised by righteousness and holiness, for which we were made (see 1:4, 2:10 and 5:27). Note the pattern: "put off old self – be renewed in mind – put on new self".

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4:25-32 Examples of gospel living

25 Paul turns to apply the principle of “put off – be renewed – put on” in specific circumstances. So, put off falsehood and put on instead truthfulness. Why? What renews our minds? The *gospel*, which teaches us that “*we are members one of another*” (see 3:6). The gospel provides the motivation and renewal of our minds which leads to changed actions. Changed minds = changed lives.

26-28 The same pattern underlies these applications: put off sinful anger, put on an attitude of sorting out disputes quickly, because the devil wants to wreck our new found unity. Put off stealing, put on honest work instead, because we are meant to live for others and help those in need.

29-30 While many of us will not admit to stealing or lying or sinful anger, our sins of speech are obvious to everyone. The principles are the same again here, but rather than expounding the principles again, why not talk about how we can help each other talk better? The “pattern” we’ve identified hasn’t been a straitjacket for Paul, but verse 30 looks like the “gospel reason” for verse 29. This reflects the teaching of 1:13-14 that all Christians have been sealed by the Spirit, marked out as God’s special possession, until the day of redemption comes. The Spirit, who is a *person* not a “force” and can therefore be upset or grieved, is not happy with “corrupting talk” which destroys the unity he is trying to build amongst us (see 2:22 and 4:3).

31-32 Put off bitterness etc., put on kindness and forgiveness, because Christ has forgiven you. Easy to understand, but harder to accomplish in practice. Is someone, or has someone, struggled with this in your group?

5:1-2 Summary: live like Jesus

1-2 The “therefore” ties this verse tightly to 4:25-32, and is a summary of everything from 4:17 onwards. Imitating God was the idea in 4:24, and is an Old Testament idea from Leviticus 11:44 “Be holy for I am holy” (see 1 Peter 1:16). Imitating God is also to imitate Christ. This “walk” of imitation is a life of “love”, a central virtue already mentioned as important for our life as a community of believers (1:15, 3:17, 4:2, 4:15-16). The greatest act and example of love was the cross. We should love as Christ loved us.

Suggestions for Leading

You could bring in a jumper to illustrate the principle of “taking off and putting on”... though your group may understand that without a visual aid! If you get time, it is worth thinking about whether there are other ethical issues to which we can apply the same “putting off-putting on, for gospel reasons” method. There are other issues in our lives on which the gospel can shed light, whether they are explicit in this text or not. The gospel teaches us a way of thinking, not just a list of commands. Paul gets specific and shows us ways of applying the gospel to particular sins: is there a way you can apply the gospel to specific issues in the way you relate as a group, or to particular life situations your group is facing? Not easy with our English reserve perhaps, but worth a try.

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Ephesians 5:3-14

Introductory Comments

It's important that we remember, when looking at Ephesians 4-6, that it is intimately related to the things we learned last term from Ephesians 1-3. That may sound obvious, but it is all too easy to detach the ethical teaching in these latter chapters from the doctrine we were taught at the start of the letter. There are clear and essential connections between the two halves of this epistle, and it is important that we spot them so we are teaching Ephesian ethics in an Ephesian way and with Ephesian motivation (so to speak). A good question, therefore, to ask of any text in chapters 4-6 is, "what does this have to do with the plan? How is it related to 1:10, for instance, or 2:10 or 2:22 or 3:6?"

The Main Point & Purpose

The main point is, "Because we are part of God's plan, Paul exhorts us to live distinctively different lives." Paul wants us to see how "out of place" certain sins are for those who are part of God's holy temple, the church, and to make us realise they lead to a different end point without the hope of the gospel. These verses (and our studies) should therefore make us see the differences very clearly and our studies should leave people in no doubt as to the seriousness of sin. In 4:25-32, holiness was the key thought, with relationships within the church as the focus. Here the focus is more on our *distinctiveness* vis-à-vis outsiders, harking back to 4:17, "*You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do...*"

The Details

3 Certain sins are not proper topics for conversation amongst those who are part of God's plan, his "saints" (see 1:1, 18; 2:19; 3:18; 4:12; 6:18 for this as a name for Christians). Not that they should literally never be spoken about, but there should be a reticence to engage in gossip about them, and there should certainly be "not even a hint" (as the NIV puts it) of such sins amongst God's people. The sins include *sexual immorality*; the word covers the whole range of extra-marital sexual relations, from bestiality and incest to homosexuality and fornication (to use the old-fashioned word for sex outside of marriage). *Impurity* could have sexual connotations too, but can also be wider than that, and the same goes for *covetousness* which could be greedy sexual self-gratification or just plain greed. Greed is *idolatry* because worshipping the true God should make us more concerned for others than for our own gain.

4 These are sins of speech which are associated with the sins of action in the previous verse, although filthiness (or "obscenity") could be both action and speech. Our sense of humour is to be reformed by the gospel so that it builds others up; crude joking is "out of place" in a community which is meant to love, build up, and support one another in every way (e.g. 4:12, 16).

5 These sins, if persisted in as a "lifestyle choice" do not lead to the glorious inheritance God has prepared for us in his kingdom (see 1:14). They disqualify a person from entering that kingdom in the future and from enjoying its blessings and benefits in the present. That is not to say God cannot save such a person (by grace he saved even those described in 2:1-3) but if a person chooses to walk in such ways rather than in the good works God prepared beforehand for us to do (2:10) then they will have no inheritance (see 1 Cor 6:9-11 for a very similar passage). This is talking about pattern of life (the direction we "walk") rather than one-off sins or lapses.

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6 These sins are not just improper for those who are putting on the new self (4:24) but they are also destined for destruction. “Sons of disobedience” were mentioned in 2:2. People do not believe in such judgment, and will seek to persuade us that it is a mere fairy tale, or that it is not as serious as the Bible says. Hence Paul warns us (because the danger is great) that we should not be thus deceived.

7 Don't get involved with those who live in this way. See 1 Corinthians 5:9-10 for a helpful corrective; it's not that we must avoid contact with non-Christians, but that we must avoid being involved in their way of life. The word “associate” here is the same as “*partaking* in the promise” in 3:6. We have a choice: be in fellowship or partnership with Christ and a part of his plan, or associates with the sons of disobedience whose end will be far different. Application could focus on how easy it is for us to get carried away into sinful actions, speech, or attitudes around friends who do not believe, and how this passage helps us fight that temptation.

8-10 Paul uses the contrast of light and dark to make the same point, about being distinctively different from unbelievers in the way we live. The fruit of walking in the light is very different from the way of darkness (i.e. the sins of verses 3-4, or of 2:1-3) which is *unfruitful*. We are part of a different plan, with a different lifestyle, and a different future to look forward to.

11-12 This could be confusing. How can we expose the works of darkness if we cannot even speak of them? Certainly our conduct alone, if it is characterised by goodness, righteousness, and truth (verse 9) will “show up” the works of darkness for what they are. Our godly lifestyles are meant to expose those of our unbelieving friends. Not that we should not also speak out against evil, but the main point here is that our distinctive lifestyle should do much of the work. Do *our* lives perform this function, or is there too much “darkness” in them? Paul says it is shameful even to mention secret or private works of darkness, never mind for us to do them.

13-14 Paul now moves from the exposing effect of light to its transforming power: it shows darkness to be dark, but then it also makes things in the dark visible. When I look out of the window of my well-lit study at night, I can see that it is definitely dark outside, and there's a big contrast with inside the house. But I could shine a floodlight into the garden and then I would be making it visible. That is the dual effect of light: it shows darkness to be dark but can also transform it so it becomes visible. This is what happened to us in verse 8, after all – we were darkness but now we are light. Indeed, we are “lit up” by Christ himself, who shines on us as verse 14 says. When he does so it is also described as “rising from the dead”, a description of our salvation used also in 2:1-6. The quote is not a direct quote from an Old Testament text, though it sounds very much like Isaiah 60:1-2 (which has other links with the context in Ephesians. See also Psalm 80:3, 7, 19). It is probably a chorus based on Isaiah which they sang at St. Paul's, Ephesus...

Suggestions for Leading

Royalty illustrations might work quite well when thinking about what is “out of place” or “improper”, e.g. it would be out of place for the Queen to swear or burp in her Christmas speech because of her position; in the same way it is out of place for us to behave in certain ways, because of our position as God's holy people.

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Ephesians 5:15-33

Introductory Comments

Part of this passage focuses on marriage. It is important for us to understand that it is not just written for married people. For a start, it helps single people understand and help their married brothers and sisters in Christ to be more godly. But it also says a great deal about the relationship between Christ and the church, of which marriage is but an illustration. So no-one should feel left out of this study, whatever their earthly marital status, for we are all part of “the bride of Christ”.

The Main Point & Purpose

The main point is “Live wisely, being controlled by God in all you do, especially in your marriages.” Paul’s purpose here is to continue the application of the doctrine in chapters 1-3, and to begin to show that the equality and unity we have in Christ does not do away with all social structures such as marriage, family, and work, but in fact help us to reform those institutions so they are more Christ-centred. Our studies should help people to grasp the connection between the doctrine and the way we should live in relationship to one another, so that our unity is fostered through wise, ordered living.

The Details

15-17 We are exhorted to “walk” (see 4:1, 17; 5:2) wisely and to make the most of the time we have for God, since there is so much evil around (see 6:12 “*this present darkness*”) to distract us from our main priorities. Wisdom, as often in the Bible, is contrasted with folly, so rather than be foolish we are to understand God’s will. Note the connection again between understanding and living.

18 When someone is drunk they lose control over their will (and other faculties). So while this is a straightforward prohibition against drunkenness for Christians, it also helps us understand what being “*filled with the Spirit*” means. Do not be controlled by wine and hence fall into debauchery; instead be controlled by God and what he wants (v17 “*the will of the Lord*”), which will lead to a different lifestyle result (v19-21). This “filling” is not received once-and-for all either at conversion (like the sealing by the Spirit in 1:13) or as a “second blessing” some time later. It is a command to be *continually* filled by God. It is probably best to understand this as being filled *with Christ by the Spirit*; in Ephesians, Christ fills all (1:23 and 4:10) and the Spirit puts God’s plan into effect (2:22; 3:5, 16). So, “*with the Spirit*” should be translated “*by*” (as it is in 3:5 “*by the Spirit*”, and 4:30, “*by whom you were sealed*”).

19-21 There follow 4 further definitions of what it looks like to be filled with Christ / controlled by the Spirit. If people are filled by the Spirit they will be singing to each other (“horizontally”), singing to the Lord (“vertically”), giving thanks for everything (see 1:16; 5:4), and submitting to one another out of reverence to Christ, to whom we all ultimately submit (1:22).

This is not, however, mutual submission of every Christian to every other Christian. It cannot mean that, for three reasons. **First**, the word itself, “submit”, implies an asymmetrical (uneven) relationship, and it means to be placed or arranged underneath someone else in a line of authority (it is used in 1:22 for instance). **Second**, the teaching on marriage, family, and work which follows (5:22-6:9) is one long application of what Paul means by “submit to one another”. The word “submit” is not actually in verse 22;

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literally it reads “*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives to your own husbands, as to the Lord*”. So v22 shows us what v21 means. There is always an order to the relationships so that wives submit to husbands (not vice-versa), children obey their parents (not vice-versa), and slaves obey their masters (not vice-versa). That does not mean there are no reciprocal obligations, i.e. that the one who is submitted to does not have responsibilities and duties towards the one doing the submitting. As we will see, Paul is quite clear about this. **Third**, and quite decisively, in 5:24 the church submits to Christ, but Christ most certainly does *not* submit to the church! If v21 means that we all submit to every other Christian, if it means “mutual submission”, then Christ must submit to us for Paul’s logic to work. That doesn’t seem right somehow! So “submit to one another” is shorthand for “submit to the people you are meant to submit to (i.e. wives to husbands)” not “submit to every other Christian.” We must indiscriminately *love* every other Christian (and our enemies) but we don’t indiscriminately *submit* to everyone.

22-24 Wives are to submit themselves (it is a voluntary act, not forced upon them by the husbands) to their husbands (not, note, to all men generally), and they do so “*as to the Lord*.” See 6:1 where children are told to obey their parents “*in the Lord*”. This implies a limit to the submission; wives cannot be asked to do something contrary to what the Lord Jesus would ask of them. Submission is not demeaning for women anymore than submitting to Christ demeans the Church. There is no stigma or implied inequality in the act of submitting: Christ himself (who is God!) submitted to his parents (Luke 2:51) and to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:27-28). Greek literature on marriage did not address wives, because they were not really thought to be rational creatures worthy of such instruction!

25 There are three times as many verses directed at the husbands in this passage as there are to the wives! Paul commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church – a self-giving, self-sacrificing love, prepared to die for the other.

26-27 Paul can’t help expanding on how amazing Christ’s love is. It would be a mistake to find a parallel to marriage in every detail here. Must a husband wash his wife? Is he responsible for all her spots and wrinkles? How is he her Saviour? *It is possible to say from these verses, however, that husbands should be concerned for their wife’s holiness and spiritual welfare, just as Christ loved the church (note the past tense, referring to the cross) and purposefully continues to care and provide for her so she might be holy.*

28-30 Christ’s consistent care for the church is an example to husbands of how they are to love their wives self-sacrificially and purposefully. The unity of husband and wife is assumed in v28, “*as their own bodies*.” They are one, as Christ and the church are one (see 1:10, and the repeated phrase “*in Christ*”). If husbands fail to love and cherish their wives they damage themselves, just as if Christ did not care for his church he would be neglecting his own body (see 1:23 and 4:12 for the church as Christ’s body).

31-32 Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 to reinforce the point that husbands and wives are “*one flesh*.” He is not just talking about earthly, human marriage, but showing how that is just a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. It seems at first that the Christ-Church relationship is an illustration of marriage but now we see that ultimately marriage is just a picture of the greater reality.

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32-33 Paul repeats the main point in verse 33 in reverse order, with “respect” (translated “reverence” in 5:21) replacing “submit” in terms of the wife’s responsibility. Note, it’s not just Paul who says these things: 1 Peter 3:1-7 teaches the same basic doctrine.

Suggestions for Leading

It is important to pray for Christian marriages, that they would indeed be modelled on the relationship of Christ and the church. It is equally important that we pray for us all to be controlled by God, being filled with Christ by the Spirit. Try to stick to the main thrust of the passage and not get bogged down in detail unless it’s *really* necessary...

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Ephesians 6:1-9

Introductory Comments

A Bible study is not just an exercise in grasping the sentence structure in a text. It is important to understand what the words mean and how they fit together, what the sentences mean and how they form paragraphs. But if we stop there, we have only done a comprehension exercise rather than a Bible study. Bible study starts with comprehension and then builds on that to application. It is too easy for us to stop short of application because it is harder and more personal than merely grasping what the text says or discussing a theological nicety. Yet God gave us his word to transform us by the renewing of our minds (see Romans 12:2 and Ephesians 4:23). So it is essential that we get to application and see how the text transforms our current thoughts, practices, habits, and routines. That is the biggest challenge in this passage.

The Main Point

Paul continues to expound what it means to walk wisely and be filled by the Spirit, by outlining how Christian children and slaves should submit to their parents and masters, and how fathers and masters should in turn behave towards children and slaves, in the light of God's plan.

The Details

1 Children submit (see 5:21) to their parents by obeying them. They do so "in the Lord", i.e. in a way that is pleasing to the Lord Jesus who is their ultimate authority (see Colossians 3:20, which is part of a similar list of household duties and is parallel to this whole section of Ephesians). He then says "this is right", to stress that it is fitting or proper for children to behave this way (see 5:3-4 for the same idea of what is right and appropriate).

2-3 Paul quotes straight from the Old Testament Law (Deuteronomy 5:16 or Exodus 20:12) to back up what he has said to children. He also adds that this is the first of the 10 Commandments with a promise attached to it. We are to understand by this that the promise still applies: that generally we will live a long happy life if such authority structures are properly observed (though obviously there are always exceptions to such general principles, in a fallen world!). It is not a promise to be "spiritualised" away so it refers just to a heavenly life. The word for long life is never used of *eternal* life (a very common phrase in the New Testament which Paul could have used if he had wanted to) but just means "a long time". Also, the long life is said explicitly to be "in the land" or "on the earth" (there is no difference in the original between the word "land" and the word "earth"). This implies it is about the here and now, not some future state. Obedience is required of all children as they are brought up (the context is obviously about children still being brought up and not yet adults, see "*bring them up*" in verse 4) but honouring parents remains a duty for all Christians however old they are (see, for instance, Matthew 15:4, 19:19). Discuss how to do that as an adult.

4 Following the pattern established with wives and husbands in 5:22-33, Paul now turns to address the stronger partner in the relationship (so to speak). But notably he addresses only "Fathers" rather than both parents, possibly because fathers need more of a reminder to be involved in the spiritual training and instruction of their children than mothers who (generally speaking throughout history) spend more time with their children, but also because the father is meant to set the spiritual tone as head of the household. They must not exasperate their children or provoke them to anger, by, for

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instance, being impossible to please, or demeaning, nagging, or harsh. Instead, they should bring them up to know and love the Lord and to live as his people, both by modelling such a lifestyle and teaching the doctrine which leads to it. Explore the ways in which the fathers in your groups try to do this.

5 Paul turns to the slave-master relationship which, despite obvious differences, most closely resembles our modern employee-employer/boss relationship. Remember, the key idea is walking wisely and being controlled by God in all we do - in this relationship as in all others we submit to the appropriate authority *out of reverence for Christ* (5:21). Slaves are encouraged to continue serving their masters with sincerity, transparency, integrity, and cheerfulness as they would (one hopes!) serve Christ, their ultimate Lord. Note that in 1 Peter 2:18 slaves are exhorted to submit to their masters even if they are harsh and unjust. What does this attitude and behaviour look like in the modern workplace?

8 Slaves are motivated to work hard in this way by the thought of a future reward from their heavenly Lord Jesus (note, the word "Lord" is the same in the original as the word for a slave's "Master"). At judgment day, Christians (who obviously escape the wrath of God by grace, 2:1-5) are nevertheless judged according to their works and rewarded accordingly by God (see, for instance, 2 Cor 5:10). This, it must be remembered, is entirely in the context of the grace of God who himself prepares good works in advance for us to do (2:10) and powerfully works in us to energise us for them (1:19, 3:20). As Augustine said, "It is through his mercy that we perform the good deeds to which the crown is awarded." This motivation is equally applicable to "*slave or free*".

9 "*Masters, do the same to them*" can't mean masters should obey their slaves, but rather that in the same way slaves should obey because they are conscious of God and his eternal rewards, so also Masters should treat their slaves properly and remember the future perspective of judgment day. On that day, they will be judged by their own heavenly Master/Lord who is completely impartial and all-knowing. What a motivation for employers and bosses! Does it affect the way any bosses in our groups behave?

Suggestions for Leading

Remember that getting to the heart of the commands here and the reasons for them is just the first step in a good Bible study. Make sure that once these main points are sufficiently clear you start to discuss how they impact you personally as a group in your different circumstances. Don't get sidetracked into long discussions about the use of the law or the status of a first century slave at the expense of a transformative encounter with God's word for us today! Remember too that since parent-child relationships are intensely emotional, it is important to avoid sounding judgemental about other people's families and their practices, even while we do want to encourage each other to continue thinking hard about how to reform every area of our lives by the word of God. Pray to handle this carefully and sensitively, but with clarity and boldness.

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Ephesians 6:10-24

Introductory Comments

We can always learn something new from “well-known” passages, especially if we re-examine the context. This famous passage on “spiritual warfare”, is no different. Having studied the whole book of Ephesians up to this point, over two terms and in good detail, we should now be ideally placed to grasp the context of this rousing text, and see how it fits well into the flow of Ephesians. This in turn will help us to better understand what spiritual warfare is really about.

The Main Point and Purpose

Paul urges the Ephesians, in view of God’s plan, to stand firm in God’s strength as they struggle against the devil’s schemes. Clearly, this is a stirring final application of all that has been said so far in the letter. It is important to grasp, however, what kind of warfare is envisaged here. It is not “marching across the land to claim the ground for Jesus” (there are no chariots or horses to ride on), but a defensive kind of struggle in which those who are already safely in the citadel (“in Christ”) stand firm against the onslaughts of the enemy whose objective is to sow doubt, division, and despair amongst us. So it is not about riding out like Alexander the Great to evangelise the world and conquer it for Christ, but more like defending Helm’s Deep against Saruman’s hoardes, if such cinematic allusions mean anything to you...! Christ has already won the victory for us, and we have been raised to be with him. All we must do is stand firm there. It would be great if our studies could at least try to emulate some of the passionate, inspiring impact of Paul’s original.

The Details

10 The final big application. With 1:10 and 4:1 this is a key verse for grasping the big idea of Ephesians. God has a plan, so live in the light of it and stand firm against opposition. We do this in God’s strength, a power we’ve heard about before in 1:19, 3:20 etc.

11-13 The “armour of God” can mean the armour God supplies, or the armour he himself wears (a thought which is reminiscent of Isaiah 59:15b-17). Its purpose is to enable us to “stand” against the enemy (note the repetition of “stand” and “withstand” all the way up to verse 14). What schemes of the devil might we expect having studied the rest of the book? Division where Christ has brought peace (2:11-22, 4:25-32) or confusion and instability where Christ desires maturity (4:14). The real enemy is not other people but the spiritual forces of evil at work to derail God’s plan in this way. The only way to stand is in God’s way with his power. Note that whereas previously we have been exhorted to “walk”, now we are encouraged to “stand”!

14 The armour is linked to the major themes of the book. Each part is connected to God’s plan somehow. The belt of truth – see 1:13, 4:15, 4:21. Truth keeps our trousers up; without it we look silly and can’t go out to face the world! The breastplate of righteousness – see 4:24 for righteousness as a quality of God which we also possess if we are new creations in him. In Ephesians it is an ethical quality (linked with “holiness” in 4:24) rather than a forensic (legal) term meaning “justified/acquitted” (as elsewhere).

15-16 Readiness comes from the gospel of peace. The gospel was mentioned in 1:13, 3:6-7 and will come up again in 6:19. Its peaceful nature must be a backwards look at 2:11-22 where we’re told “Christ is our peace”, bringing peace ① between us and God,

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and also ☺ between Jews and Gentiles. So Paul urges us to be always ready as gospel peacemakers in both those senses. Faith (or belief) – mentioned in 1:13, 15, 19; 2:8; 3:12, 17; 4:5,13 – guards us against doubt, unites us to Christ, and gives us confidence in our walk with God. These are all things which the devil would like to assault with his flaming arrows.

17 Salvation protects our heads, the gospel of our salvation by grace (1:13, 2:5, 8). The sword given by the Spirit is God's word. The "word" is key in 1:13 and especially 4:11 where we noted that Christ gave teachers of the word to us to equip us for unity, stability, and maturity. The sword is the only offensive weapon here, but the word used for sword describes a dagger-like blade useful for close combat, rather than King Arthur's Excalibur. It is useful for fighting off attacks when the enemy gets close. Jesus used God's word in this way (see Luke 4:1-13) and Paul has applied the word of the gospel to different areas of our lives in 4:25-32 for instance.

18 We put on the armour whilst also praying constantly for all our brothers and sisters in Christ to stand firm in the battle as well. Mention of praying "in the Spirit" goes back to 2:18 where we were told that through Christ we have *access to the Father in one Spirit*. We are also being built together as a body of united believers by the Spirit (2:22), so he is particularly keen to aid us in our prayers for one another. Looking at these other references to the Spirit in Ephesians helps to show that prayer "in the Spirit" doesn't mean a particular type of prayer (such as praying in tongues) but has to do more with the intention of the prayer.

19-20 Paul wants the Ephesians also to pray for him, for the right words to use in proclaiming the gospel and for boldness in that task. Obviously we do not pray specifically for Paul now (!) but this would still be a great prayer for all those involved in any kind of gospel proclamation: pray for the right words and for boldness. Boldness is necessary in the midst of battle, but not always easy. It is also perfectly fitting since we have a great and glorious gospel to proclaim, "the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation" (1:13).

21-24 It would be unbalanced to spend *too* much time on this bit, but it is well worth noticing that Paul's purpose in sending Tychicus with the letter (to read it out perhaps, and explain any difficult bits to the listeners!) was to encourage the Ephesians' hearts. Encouragement is one of the key purposes of the letter as a whole (see also 3:13 and 4:1 where the original for "urge" is the same as the word for "encourage"). Hopefully our study of the letter over the last few weeks and months has had that effect on our groups...

Suggestions for Leading

Putting on the armour of God basically means knowing the gospel, living the gospel, and telling the gospel. That is how we stand firm in Jesus. It's simple, but it requires all God's strength and his mighty power for us to do it. Those are the main points to get across, rather than having an in-depth study of the individual pieces of armour. So it's good to focus on the big point, but it's also good to see how it fits in with the rest of the letter and is not just a random exhortation tacked on at the end. Spend some time looking at how "Ephesians" it all is. Perhaps you could even dress up in armour to illustrate the main points to your group...? ☺

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Summary of Ephesians 1-6

At the start of tonight's session, we will read through the whole 6 chapters together again, out loud. While we do that, please encourage people to listen carefully and to see how much they've learned, and what particularly strikes them as we read it again after studying it for so many months.

Since the last study (on Ephesians 6:10-24) was something of a summary of the whole letter anyway, for this last session on Ephesians, we are going to spend some time "praying in" the letter. First see whether people have got a good grasp of the whole thing, by discussing the "question to ponder" for this week, which is basically about summarising the whole epistle in one sentence... You could suggest various different ways of summarising Ephesians and discuss their relative merits, or just start with a blank piece of paper and see what people come up with. Useful questions to ask at this point, to elicit responses... What are the main themes that should be included in a summary? What has the thrust of the whole letter been? What are the key verses?

Then, go round the group and ask what particular thing has struck people or changed them or excited them or challenged them over the last two terms as we have studied this book. This will also give something of a picture of how people have understood and grasped Ephesians. It would be helpful if people made notes of these things so that you can "pray them in" together at the end.

After you've done this, have another brief look at the prayers in Ephesians. These are in 1:15-23, 3:14-21 and also in 6:18-20. Read them together and then pray for a good length of time about all we've learned these last two terms from Ephesians, including prayers for each other as part of that or as a separate time afterwards depending on your group.

The intention of this evening is not to fill our heads with more Ephesians but to remind ourselves of how much Ephesians is already in there and then to pray it in. We often don't pray as much as we'd like to in our groups because there's so much to get through in the study. So this is the chance to reverse that!

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Appendix 1: Prep Questions for Ephesians Studies

Questions to ponder...

It's a great idea to read through the passage we're going to be studying each week in Central Focus. Why not print off the questions and have it around as you read Ephesians, and try to answer the questions...

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Questions on Ephesians 1:11-14

1. What is the link between Ephesians 1:1-10 and Ephesians 1:11-14?
2. What themes run through all of Ephesians 1:1-14?
3. Is there anything that can stop God from fulfilling his plan for the world?
4. How does someone become part of God's plan?

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Questions on Ephesians 1:15-23

1. What is the link between Ephesians 1:3-14 and Ephesians 1:15-23? i.e. what connects the bit we've done before to this new passage?
2. What do you normally pray for Christian people you don't know?
3. What does Paul pray for the Ephesians? Break down what he says into different prayer requests...
4. How does your answer in question 2 (above) compare to what Paul prays for in Ephesians 1:15-23? Are you praying the same sorts of things as Paul?
5. Why do you think Paul tells them what he's praying for them? i.e. what's the point of reporting the content of his quiet times?

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Questions on Ephesians 2:1-10

1. What is the link between Ephesians 1:15-23 and Ephesians 2:1-10? i.e. what connects the bit we've done before to this new passage? Are there any common words or themes in both passages?
2. How bad a person were you before you were converted? Make a list of all the things 2:1-3 says about a non-Christian. Did you ever think you were as bad as 2:1-3 says?
3. "It's 50% God and then 50% me. God does his bit and then we have to do ours." Is that an accurate picture of salvation according to this passage? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. What is verse 7 saying about God's *purpose* in saving us?
5. So are we not meant to do "good works" then, if it's "not by works so that no-one can boast" (verse 9)?

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Questions on Ephesians 3:1-13

1. What is the link between Ephesians 2:11-22 and Ephesians 3:1-13?
2. Why *specifically* is Paul suffering in prison?
3. What is Paul's place in God's plan to unite all things in Christ? In other words, is he at all special and if so, how?
4. What is the purpose of the church, according to 3:10? What does that actually mean in practice?
5. What is the purpose of this passage? That is, why does he tell us all this? (Does he specifically tell us how we should respond to what he says...?)

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Questions on Ephesians 3:14-21

1. "For this reason..." (verse 14). For what reason? In other words, to what is Paul referring back? E.g. what prompts him to pray?

2. What is the single thing he prays for? (verse 16). What does that mean?

3. If you have verse 16, what will follow from that (according to verses 17-19)?

4. What is different about this prayer and the one in 1:15-23? What accounts for this different emphasis?

5. What words or themes in 3:20-21 are echoes from the rest of chapters 1-3?

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Questions on Ephesians 4:1-16

1. What is the key, repeated, word in 4:1-6? How is this related to the key verse of Ephesians as a whole (1:10)?
2. What does God want for the Church according to this passage (4:1-16)?
3. What does Jesus give the Church to ensure that God's desires for the Church is fulfilled?
4. How do these gifts operate at St. Helen's, and does it work to fulfil God's purposes for us?
5. What might stop the Church from "growing up" properly?

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Questions on Ephesians 4:17 – 5:2

1. What is the structure of this long passage? In other words, how would you split it up into its component parts of bite-size chunks (about 3-10 verses)?
2. What is the key problem with the Gentile way of life?
3. What is the key difference in the Christian life?
4. What do all the reasons given for living differently in verses 25-32 have in common? In other words, is there a common theme or reason for us to live differently?
5. What's the point of 5:1-2?

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Questions on Ephesians 5:3-14

1. There are several reasons from this passage why we should not indulge in the sins mentioned in verses 3-4. What are they, and how are they related to the rest of Ephesians?
2. Why is greed called "idolatry"?
3. How is this section different from 4:25-32? In other words, why didn't Paul just include sexual immorality, impurity, and greed when he addressed lying, anger, theft, and bitterness in the previous section? What is different about the focus of this section?
4. How can we expose the unfruitful works of darkness (verse 11) if we are not to even mention them (verse 12)?

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Questions on Ephesians 5:15-33

1. Verses 15-18 contain several contrasts (“not this, but that”). What are they?
2. Given that drunkenness leading to debauchery is its opposite, what does being “filled with the Spirit” mean?
3. Verses 19-21 unpack verse 18 and give at least four results of being filled with the Spirit. What are they?
4. Why should wives submit to their husbands?
5. Why should husbands love their wives?
6. What do verses 22-33 tell us about Jesus?

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Questions on Ephesians 6:1-9

1. This is still part of the explanation of what it will look like if we are filled with the Spirit. So what is the job of a Spirit-filled child, and a spirit-filled parent?

2. How can Fathers obey verse 4?

How can mothers help them?

How can those without children help them?

What part does the church play in that?

3. If we think of slavery as the first century equivalent of employment, what do verses 5-8 tell us about our attitude to work?

4. Why should slaves work hard (v 8)? Why should Masters behave properly towards their slaves? What do these two commands have in common?

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Questions on Ephesians 6:10-24

1. Is spiritual warfare about marching across the land to claim the ground for Jesus, according to these verses? If not, what kind of battle is it, and what is our objective?
2. Write down the different part of the armour of God.
3. Go through the list above and next to each part of the armour write down where the words have been mentioned before in Ephesians (so, for "*belt of truth*" write down where the word (or concept) of "truth" has come up before etc.).
4. Who are we to pray for, and what do we pray for them (v18-20).
5. Why should we pray for those particular things, in the light of Ephesians as a whole?
6. What do verses 21-24 tell us about the purpose of Ephesians?

STUDY NOTES ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Questions on Ephesians 1-6 as a whole

1. How would you summarise the teaching of Ephesians as a whole into one sentence. Try to get the main emphases of the letter into your sentence, without making it as long as Ephesians 1:3-14!

2. What is the one main thing that studying Ephesians for the last two terms has taught you?

3. How has studying Ephesians changed you in the last few months?

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Appendix 2: Outline and Introduction to Ephesians

Good evening and welcome to our introductory evening. It's great to have both homegroups and Central Focus together this evening. Before we start the evening's festivities though, let's pray...

PRAY

Tonight we're going to do three things. First, we're going to think for a few minutes about what Central Focus and Homegroups are all about, then we're going to think particularly about Ephesians which we're studying this year, and finally we're going to spend some time in our groups praying for the coming term. So, what's the point, what's Ephesians all about, and prayer.

First then, what's the point of Central Focus and Homegroups? I know many of us will have been doing this for many years, but it is good to remind ourselves of what we're all about, and why we do what we do. In order to do that, please turn with me to Ephesians 4. Let me read verses 1-16...

"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call - one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." (*English Standard Version*)

God wants a firm body

Let's look at this backwards for a change, just to keep you all awake. So let's look first at verses 14-16, which tell us that **God wants a firm body**. I don't mean he wants to

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have strong shoulders, a stomach like a six pack, and bulging biceps (like me). No, I mean that he wants us as a Church, the body of Christ, to be firm.

God doesn't want us to be unstable, unbalanced, and wobbly, blown back and forth on the waves. He wants us to be steady, unwavering, secure, and safe as Christians. Not blown off course by what verse 14 calls the wind and waves of "*human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*"

In other words, false teaching may come in to the church and rock the boat. God doesn't want us to be unsteady in the face of these inevitable waves. It is inescapable – there will be false teachers and false doctrines in the church of Jesus Christ. We shouldn't be surprised by that. Even at St. Helen's we are not immune from the human ability to get it wrong or to twist the truth. But God wants us to be firm in the face of such attacks.

God wants us to be united and mature

So God wants a firm body. Second, as we work our way backwards through this passage, verse 13 uses the words "unity" and "mature." In other words, God wants us to be united and mature. **God wants us to be united and mature.** So, he doesn't want us to be always disagreeing about things. He doesn't want us to be uncertain and unclear and confused. No, God wants us to be united in what we believe, so we all grow to be like Jesus.

"Maturity" means he doesn't want us to be babies. Our son, Joshua, is a toddler. He is not mature. He needs us to change his nappies. He needs us to tell him not to stick his fingers in the electrical sockets. He needs to be disciplined and told he can't throw daddy's books all around the house. He can't have an adult conversation with anyone, and he doesn't know what's best for him. God doesn't want us as Christians to be like that. He wants us to have more understanding of what is good for us, and what is not. He doesn't want to have to discipline us all the time, but for us to behave like adults: less self-centred, more grown up.

God wants us to be prepared to serve

So God wants a firm body, and he wants us to be united and mature. Continuing to move backwards through the passage then... Verse 12 tells us that God wants us to be prepared to serve. **God wants us to be prepared to serve.** Verse 12 says he wants God's people to be equipped "*for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*"

What does that mean? Well, it means he wants us all to be ministers, or servants. The word there translated "ministry" could equally well be translated "service". So God wants us all to be doing ministry, and serving one another. That means building each other up with the gospel, the good news. That means encouraging each other with the word of God, correcting each other when we go wrong maybe, or comforting each other when we need it. That's what verse 15 meant when it said, "speaking the truth in love".

God wants all Christians to be ministers, not just some special elite who have been to theological college or who are paid to do it. All Christians are ministers, we minister to each other and serve each other. No-one is meant to just be a "consumer" in the church. We are all meant to be involved somehow, working together with our different gifts and different abilities.

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It is often said that the larger the church, the more passengers it carries. The larger the church, the more passengers it carries. But no Christian is meant to be a passenger. Now I *don't* mean that everyone should be leading a Central Focus or Homegroup. That needs to be done of course, but it's not the only thing that needs to be done. No, there are other ministries in the church which we need as well. We need people to serve and minister in other public ways like helping with the coffee rota or the welcome team or clearing away service sheets on a Sunday morning. Those things all need doing, and it is valuable service.

And then there is the kind of service that is not so public – getting alongside someone in your group and helping them through a rough patch in their life; being a friend to that new couple who don't know many people, offering hospitality to newcomers, praying for each other in private, giving, writing letters of encouragement, challenging people.

All these things, and many other ministries of service are needed within the body. No-one is meant to be just a consumer. A church is a congregation, not an audience. We are not meant to be passive while someone else entertains us. I know we can get that impression because the chairs on Sunday are arranged in cinema style, all facing forward. But actually we are meant to be, metaphorically, all facing each other. We are all meant to get involved, building up the body of Christ. Whoever we are, that is our job.

That is the job of every member of Central Focus and homegroups. That way, we depend not on full-time members of staff but on each other, as we minister to ourselves as a church. Serving our fellow-Christians is actually good for us, because it builds up another part of the body that we're all members of.

So how does this passage in Ephesians 4 work so far? Looking forwards from verse 12, we are equipped to serve each other and build up the body. That helps us to be united and mature. And that, in turn, is what makes us a firm body – not susceptible to the wind and waves of trouble or of new teachings, but solid, unshakeable, and steady. That's what God wants us to be like as a group of Christians. But how does he make sure it happens? How does God make sure that Christians are prepared for works of service and equipped for ministering to each other?

Bible teachers are God's gift

Well, verses 7-11 tell us. Those verses tell us that Bible teachers are God's gift. **Bible teachers are God's gift.** The risen ascended Jesus gave gifts to his church. Now, this is not a list of spiritual gifts such as we might find in 1 Corinthians or Romans. Here, Paul only mentions the gifts which are needed to achieve God's ultimate purpose that is in view here. It only mentions the gifts which equip the saints for ministry; the gifts which are given to ensure our unity in the faith; the gifts which if properly used will stop us being vulnerable and at risk from every new trick of the devil.

There they are in verse 11. It says, "*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry.*"

I'm not going to spoil your study of this passage in a few months time by giving you all the details. But it's clear from Ephesians that the apostles and prophets are the foundational gifts, the ones upon which the church is built. We have the words of the apostles and prophets here in the Scriptures, which are simultaneously the words of men and the word of God.

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Evangelists are those who take the word of God and proclaim it to others. Like the person who first told each one of us the good news. And finally Paul mentions pastors and teachers, or as the footnote puts it, pastor-teachers – because Paul is really thinking of one group: people who pastor or shepherd the flock, the people of God, by teaching the word.

What do all these gifts in verse 11 have in common? They are all word gifts. It is God's word which starts the whole process off. So God speaks, the apostles and prophets preach and write God's word, the evangelists proclaim it, and the pastors teach it. That is what equips us all to serve. Bible teaching unites us and makes us grow in maturity. And it enables us to be firm and stable as Christians and as a Church. Or as I like to put it:

*♪ The more encouragement from the word
the more that we will want to serve ♪*

It doesn't rhyme very well, but hey, rhyming isn't everything... The more encouragement we get from the Bible, the more we will want to serve God's people. But also, the more we will be able to serve as well, because we will understand how to speak the truth in love to one another so much better.

Now, there may be very few full-time pastor-teachers here this evening. But there are many ministers. And as our groups get stuck into the Bible more and more, the idea is that we will start to minister to one another within the groups. Not, did you notice, that the group leaders start to do all the ministering and looking after people. No, the whole point is that we minister to and serve each other.

The group leader's job is to make sure that the Bible is rightly handled. Because then, God's voice is heard, and he rules over us. We don't want our leaders to rule over us and for it to be their job alone this year to serve us. No, the idea is for them to help us in our groups to understand God's word as well as we can, so that God rules us through his word. And that in turn will encourage each and every one of us to serve each other.

So that's an overview of what we're all about as Central Focus and Homegroups. We are here to tuck into God's word, so that we can be equipped to serve one another and build up the body. That is God's chosen method for constructing and maintaining his church. Small groups are a brilliant way of achieving that over-arching purpose of God, because in a small group we can get to know each other more intimately and so help each other out better. We can pray for one another, and support one another.

That's what it's all about. Not just another course for us to attend, so we stick a bit more religious information into our heads. No, this is more like a cookery course where we learn in order to feed each other. Or a first aid course, where we learn in order to fix each other. Or an ante-natal course, where we learn in order to prepare each other for an inevitable event one day in the future – not giving birth of course, but we prepare each other for the glorious day when Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead and to take his people to be with him for ever.

So that's a brief overview of what our groups are all about. And, you may have noticed, it was also a first look at Ephesians, which we will be chewing on for the next six months.

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Now we're going to look a bit more at Ephesians, and try to get an overview of the whole letter. But before we do that, we're actually going to read the whole letter through right now.

I think this is an important thing to do for several reasons. First, Ephesians was written to be read out in one go. It was not, like other letters are not, written to be broken up into verses and studied only a few at a time. That's a good thing to do, obviously, but Ephesians was also meant to be appreciated as a whole.

Second, it is good for us to listen to the whole letter read out now, because that's much better than me explaining it. Let's read God's word and let him teach us directly through his word, and then I'll add my tuppence worth to try and explain what we've read. Then after that, we'll pray in our groups.

So, as we listen, try to see if you can write down any repeated words or phrases, and any recurring themes. See if you can spot any key verses as well, or discern the structure of the letter. And if you want, make a note of any difficult or interesting verses you think you need to ponder a bit more. So, let's sit under God's word together...

Read Ephesians out loud...

Wasn't that brilliant? To get a feel for the whole letter in one go. Imagine the Ephesians sitting there listening to Tychicus reading it out to them for the first time...

We are one in Christ now

So what's the big picture? Well, Ephesians says **we are one in Christ now**. I think one of the key verses has to be chapter 1 verse 10. God's plan is to unite all things in Christ. That's a key verse which explains the rest of the first three chapters. God will bring everything in the universe together under Jesus Christ. "All things", whether the unseen powers and authorities in the heavenly realms, or the things on earth that we can see – different nations, different people.

God wants to bring them together, to unite them, whereas previously they have been separated and at war, with God and with one another. And he wants to bring them together under *Christ*, so that every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord – no-one else. That's the big picture of what's going on in the universe. And it's the big picture of what's going on in Ephesians as well. Because after we hear about this plan, which will be completed "in the fullness of time", we also hear that it has begun to be achieved. We are one in Christ now.

For a start, Christ has been raised and exalted to be the head over everything. That's stage 1 of God's plan, in chapter 1 verse 20, God has shown his great strength "*that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.*"

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Stage two is when everything is brought together under Christ as head. First, each one of us individually is brought from spiritual death to spiritual life. We are then brought *together* or *united* with one another under Christ, a picture of which is the union of Jews and Gentiles into the one plan of God. Look at chapter 2 verse 14, "*Christ himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.*"

So we are united as one church, under Christ. That is what we are in reality; that is our calling. We weren't always one in Christ – something has happened to change our situation. Christ has broken down the dividing wall between us, and he has dealt with the sin that separated us from God and made us objects of his wrath. Or as 5:8 says, "*at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.*"

Be one in Christ now

So after expounding God's plan and telling us we are one in Christ now, Paul turns to direct application in chapter 4. Look at 4:1, which is the pivot or hinge on which the letter turns, "*I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.*" In other words, it is God's plan that we are united under Christ. Therefore, live in a way that shows you are part of that plan. Or, you might say, **be one in Christ now**. You are one in Christ now, so "be one in Christ now!"

So then there's the first half of chapter 4 which we've looked at already. That tells us that we are united through the gift of God's word as it works within the congregation of God's people. Then we hear about the kind of lifestyle a person who is united under Christ will live in chapters 4, 5, and 6. Basically Paul urges us to live out the gospel. Knowing the good news of what God has planned for the universe should change our lives. In the light of God's plan, we should start to live like Jesus. Paul applies the gospel to our relationships: our marriages in chapter 5, and our home lives and our work at the beginning of chapter 6.

Which brings us to the summary application of the letter in 6:10. Since most of God's plan to unite all things in Christ has already been achieved, all we must do is stand firm until the end. Did you see that emphasis in the last bit about the armour of God?

Finally, *be strong in the Lord* says 6:10. Then 6:11, *Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to **stand** against the schemes of the devil.* On to verse 13, *take up the whole armour of God that you may be able to **withstand** in the evil day, and having done everything, to **stand**.* Verse 14, ***Stand firm** then...*

So spiritual warfare is not about marching across the land to claim the ground for Christ and invade the places where he is not king. No, he is king over everything already, and all we need to do is keep standing until the fullness of time arrives and God deals once-and-for-all with the opposition. But nobody said that would be easy. Paul says there that we need all of God's strength just to keep standing.

So that's how the letter unfolds. God's plan in 1:10 is opened up for us in chapters 1-3. Then chapter 4-6 show us how to live in the light of God's plan, and urge us to stand firm until the end point arrives and the new world begins.

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Paul's Purpose

Why did Paul write this letter? Paul's purpose in writing Ephesians is to **encourage** his readers to stand firm in the face of suffering and in "this present darkness" as he calls it in chapter 6 verse 12. He himself is in prison according to 3:1 and 4:1 but he says in 3:13 that he doesn't want them to lose heart because of that either.

He encourages them by **enlightening** them about the gospel. He lets us in on the secret of the gospel, or as he puts it in 3:4, "*When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ.*" That mystery is the gospel, the good news of what God has done, is doing, and will do in the world through Jesus Christ. Understanding this will help them persevere.

But Paul doesn't just encourage them by enlightening them. He also encourages them by **exhorting** them. He wants them to live in the light of God's big plan, to live each day as if what he says is true. To ignore the devil's worldview which is pushed on them from every angle and which would cause them to give up following Christ. So he exhorts them and urges them, presses them to keep going, insists that they turn away from sin and pushes them towards Jesus.

So by writing Ephesians, Paul is encouraging them by enlightening them and exhorting them. Or if you like he wants them to **be steadfast** because they know the **big picture** in the midst of the **battle**.

To whom is Ephesians written?

And this is not just for the Christians in Ephesus. Several very reliable and important early manuscripts do not contain those little words in 1:1, "in Ephesus". Most manuscripts do though, it's just that the ones that don't are usually very reliable. One guy in the early church called this the letter to the Laodiceans.

I think the best explanation of all this is that Ephesians is actually a circular. It's like a tract, sent to Ephesus as the chief city and church of the province of Asia Minor (that's Turkey), and then circulated to all the other churches round and about, like Laodicea, and Colosse. Colossians is very similar to Ephesians, and looks as if it may have been written at about the same time. And at the end of Colossians Paul tells them to swap letters with the Laodiceans, so we know this kind of passing around of letters did go on.

But whatever the situation in the first century, whether this really is "to Ephesus" or "to Laodicea" or "to everyone in Asia Minor"... it is also for us. Because it is all too easy for us to be discouraged and depressed as Christians. We lose sight of God's big picture and we focus instead on the mundane trivialities of this world, where things are hard sometimes and being a Christian is not easy.

So we need Ephesians to lift our eyes to heaven where God is sovereign, the God who is able to work out all things in conformity with his plan. Ephesians shows us that God has a plan to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

What we do here, on earth, as part of God's church is a crucial part of that plan. What we do here reverberates in the heavenly realms. As 3:10 puts it, "*through the church the manifold wisdom of God is made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*" Ephesians reminds us that what we do matters, and all we need to do is stand

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firm. Lots of things will try to knock us off balance and take our eyes off the goal, but we must press on.

We have a great future ahead of us. We are one in Christ now, so be one in Christ now, looking forward to the day when we will truly be one, in Christ and with Christ forever.

Obviously there's much more we could say about Ephesians, but I don't want to spoil our fun as we study this magnificent letter together over the next 6 months...