The Bible tells us that before faith in Christ, we were dead in our sins (Ephesians 2:1). This is true of the whole of humanity. Regardless of how moral and upright a person might appear, he or she cannot escape this indictment of deadness. Apart from Christ, we are dead in our sins—not sick, not dying, but dead. But God, because of His love for us, makes us alive with Christ. Salvation is by God’s grace apart from our good works, “it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

To the Galatians, Paul wrote that “a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16), and “if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (2:21).

Jesus Himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus is waiting for you now.

- **Admit** to God that you are a sinner. Repent, turning away from your sin.

- **By faith receive** Jesus Christ as God’s Son and accept Jesus’ gift of forgiveness from sin. He took the penalty for your sin by dying on the cross.

- **Confess** your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. You may pray a prayer similar to this as you call on God to save you: “Dear God, I know that You love me. I confess my sin and need of salvation. I turn away from my sin and place my faith in Jesus as my Savior and Lord. In Jesus’ name I pray, amen.”

After you have received Jesus Christ into your life, tell a pastor or another Christian about your decision. Show others your faith in Christ by asking for baptism by immersion in your local church as a public expression of your faith.
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*Evangelistic Emphasis
MEET THE WRITERS

Greg Pouncey wrote the Bible commentary for this study of Ephesians. Greg is the senior pastor of First Baptist Church, Clinton, Mississippi. He holds degrees from Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama (B.A.) and the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas (M.Div., Ph.D.).

James Jackson wrote the odd-numbered group Bible study plans. He is the Grow Pastor at First Baptist Church, Prattville, Alabama and a graduate of Southern Seminary and Georgia State University. He and his wife, Trish, have two sons.

Laura Magness wrote the even-numbered group Bible study plans for this study. She is the Director of Children’s Ministry for Trinity Church of Nashville, Tennessee. She spent ten years as an editor and writer at LifeWay. Originally from Lexington, Kentucky, Laura graduated from Samford University (B.A.) and Dallas Theological Seminary (M.A.). Laura and her husband, Nathan, are the parents of two very busy, young boys.
A WORD FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR

Often people will say to us, “Good luck!” You don’t have to be around me for very long to discover that I don’t believe in luck. I only believe in luck if it stands for Living Under Christ’s Knowledge! As followers of Jesus, we have something so much better than luck; we enjoy the blessings of Almighty God. In Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, we discover some of the richest blessings that are ours as saints—we discover what it means to be “in Christ.”

Even though the apostle Paul was in prison when he wrote the Letter of Ephesians, he knew and we know that the Word of God cannot be bound. The decrees of ancient rulers of Paul’s day and time are forgotten today. The laws of the mighty Roman Empire are disregarded today. But a letter written from a prison cell almost two thousand years ago is being read and studied by millions of people around the world in the twenty-first century.

Of course, this isn’t just true of Ephesians. The Bible is still the world’s most-read book. Although it was written by over forty men spanning more than 1,600 years writing in three languages, it has one central theme: God’s loving redemption of fallen humanity. This theme is reflected in Ephesians.

As you study this letter, I pray that God will revitalize you and bring revival to you and to your church.

David Orlo Dykes

David Orlo Dykes has been pastor of Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas since 1991. He is a graduate of Samford University, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and completed post-doctoral study at Cambridge University, Cambridge, England. He has written sixteen Christian living books including Handling Life’s Disappointments; No, That’s NOT in the Bible; Finding Peace in Your Pain; and Pastor David’s Travel Guide to Heaven. In addition, he is completing a trilogy of novels that are set in Israel. Writing as David Orlo, he has published The Cloud Strike Prophecy and The Jerusalem Protocol. The Masada Proposal is scheduled for publication in late 2019.
Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).

**Apostle**—a word used in three ways in the New Testament: (1) to describe those who were sent with a message; (2) the twelve disciples of Jesus; (3) those who were leaders in the early church, providing pastoral leadership in a role similar to a modern-day missionary or church planter (See Acts 14:14; Gal. 1:19; Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 4:6,9.)

**Evangelist**—an individual with a unique gifting and calling to proclaim the gospel; not all believers have the spiritual gift of evangelism but all believers are tasked with the mandate to share the gospel

**Holy**—denotes separation from everything impure; an attribute of God; in the New Testament believers are called “saints,” which literally means “holy ones,” because through faith God justifies sinners, pronouncing them holy in His sight

**Mystery**—a word used by Paul to describe the message of the gospel (Eph. 3:3); an “open secret”; God’s truth made known by revelation

**Predestined**—literally means “to mark out beforehand”; used in the Bible six times (Acts 4:28; Rom. 8:29,30; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:5,11); refers to God’s purposes for believers determined ahead of time

**Prophet**—people in the Old Testament who either revealed the Word of God to people in their generation (forthtelling) or predicted the future as God revealed it to them (foretelling); in the New Testament, the gift of prophecy involves the proclamation of God’s Word applied to contemporary issues

**Redemption/redeem**—the act of freeing or releasing by paying a ransom price; Jesus gave Himself as a ransom for many to free sinners from the bondage of sin (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45)

**Righteousness**—refers to the result of God’s action in declaring believers righteous—that is, to be without guilt; God declares people to be righteous when they put their trust in Jesus (Rom. 5:1)

**Saint**—a believer in Christ; the word is related to “holy” or “set apart”
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USING THIS GUIDE TO LEAD

BEFORE THE GROUP TIME

1. **Study the core passage.**
   Start preparing early. Read the passage, listing people, places, key words, key phrases, and actions taken. Use the commentary included in the *Explore the Bible Leader Guide*, the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary*, and *Biblical Illustrator* to discover information about the items you listed. Write a summary of the truths you discovered using the statement printed under the session title of each session as a starting place.

2. **Create a group time plan.**
   Identify the main idea of the session. Craft a group plan that helps the group discover and respond to the main idea. Consult the Group Plans in the *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (includes ideas for using the *Personal Study Guide*). Identify ways to focus the group’s attention, explore the text, summarize the lesson, and challenge the group.
   For additional ideas or questions, consult *QuickSource* and *Explore the Bible Extra* (identifies a current event to introduce and conclude the lesson, found at Blog, LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible/adults/LeaderExtras). Review the *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* items, determining how to best use them in your group’s setting.

3. **Gather and review.**
   Use the list in Gather the Following Items list on the first page of each session as a starting place. Make sure you have additional copies of *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* for anticipated guests.

DURING THE GROUP TIME

4. **Arrive early.**
   Make sure you are the first person to arrive. Pray as you set up the area. Greet everyone as participants arrive and focus their attention on the Bible study.

5. **Lead the group in a time of Bible study.**
   Use the plan you created, recording notes along the way to help you remember how the group responded. Remember, every group experience takes a few unexpected twists and turns; be flexible.

AFTER THE GROUP TIME

6. **Evaluate and Record.**
   Review Practice for ideas to encourage the group to put into practice the truths discovered. Record prayer requests and other insights you gained about the group and specific participants. Use these notes to help you be a better teacher in the future.

7. **Start preparing to lead the next group time.**
MEETING THE EXPLORE THE BIBLE
FAMILY OF ADULT RESOURCES

CORE RESOURCES

Use the Daily Discipleship Guide or Personal Study Guide & Leader Guide as the core resource for your group.

Daily Discipleship Guide
Resource for both the group members and the group leader. An alternative to the Personal Study Guide/Leader Guide model. Includes key words, commentary and questions for the group, daily Bible readings for personal study after the group time, and ideas for smaller groups to discuss the study. Leader helps with targeted teaching plans included in back.

Personal Study Guide
Resource for the group members to help them prepare for and study during the group time.

Adult Leader Guide
Resource for leaders of groups using the Personal Study Guide. Includes commentary and teaching plans.

Additional Leader Helps

Adult Commentary
Provides additional insight into the passages studied.

QuickSource
Resource for leaders, providing additional discussion questions, an object lesson, and dig deeper feature. Also provides a tool for an individual called on to step in to lead the group on short notice.

Adult Leader Pack
Resource filled with posters, masters for informative handouts, and a CD-ROM (includes DOC files of the Leader Guide commentary, group plans, the pack items in PDF format, and other helps for the leader).

Biblical Illustrator
Resource providing biblical backgrounds related to the session using articles, photos, and illustrations.

Find out more or order at LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible

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INTRODUCTION TO EPHESIANS

The Letter to the Ephesians is considered by many to be the greatest of Paul’s writings. It has been called by some “the queen of the Epistles,” and few would challenge that claim. W.O. Carver called the letter “the greatest piece of writing in all history.” It has been described as “an anthem to the sovereign grace of God displayed toward sinners in Christ” that “contains some of the worst news (‘you were dead in your trespasses and sins’) and best news (‘but God … made us alive with Christ’) in all of Scripture.” In this inspired letter written from a prison cell almost two thousand years ago we discover some of the richest blessings that are ours in Christ.

WRITER

Paul referred to himself as the writer of Ephesians in two places (1:1; 3:1). He also revealed personal information about his imprisonment and his desire to continue speaking boldly the gospel to those who held him in chains (Eph. 6:19-20). The early church recognized the letter as Paul’s from the time that the books were being assembled in the second century. The letter has a solid foundation as an authentic letter of the apostle Paul.

FIRST AUDIENCE AND DESTINATION

Many have suggested that Paul wrote this letter not only to the church at Ephesus, but also intended it to be a circular letter that would be read by other churches in the province of Asia. It is widely believed that Paul wrote the letter from Roman imprisonment around AD 60–61. This imprisonment is described at the end of the Book of Acts.

Paul’s arrival in Ephesus is detailed in Acts 19. He had left Corinth and traveled to Ephesus. He found there some disciples who were followers of John the Baptist, but they had not yet trusted Jesus and received the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-7). He preached the gospel, and they came to Christ and were filled with the Holy Spirit. Then, he preached in the Jewish synagogue in Ephesus. He did this over a period of three months, but opposition forced him out of the synagogue. He did not go far, carrying his discussion to the lecture hall of Tyrannus, where Jews and Gentiles came to hear him preach (19:8-10). While in Ephesus, he performed an exorcism that caused the people to turn from their evil practices and burn their religious texts, turning from their idolatry (19:11-20). This infuriated some officials, leading to a riot in the city. Large numbers of people turning to Christ would hurt the worship of Artemis, the principle god of Ephesus with a temple that was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Paul was forced to leave town (19:21-41). But Christianity continued to grow there, and Paul would later stop and address the Ephesian elders on his way to Jerusalem, where he knew he would be arrested (20:17-38). He loved the Ephesian church and desired to see the work of Christ there thriving.

PURPOSE AND THEMES

The purpose of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians can be seen in the structure of the letter. In chapters 1–3, Paul discussed the new life they had experienced in Christ. These chapters set a theological foundation for salvation and defended the right of both Jews and Gentiles to be incorporated into the body of Christ. Paul wrote a theological treatise about salvation so that everyone would understand the gospel. He began with a focus on the purpose of Christ (1:3-14) and a prayer for the church (Eph. 1:15-23). Then,
he gave a clear presentation of salvation and how it impacts one’s life (2:1-10). This led to a discussion about how Christ has torn down the wall between Jews and Gentiles, incorporating them into one new body through Christ (2:11-22). He explained that this was a mystery revealed by Christ. It was not a new plan but the fulfillment of God’s age-old plan to save the nations as well as the Jews (3:1-13). Paul ended the first half of the letter by praying a second time for the church in Ephesus, this time asking God to do even above what they imagined (3:14-21).

In chapters 4–6, Paul encouraged the believers in Ephesus to display their new walk. They were to walk in a way that was worthy of their new relationship with Christ (4:1-16). This involved putting off the old nature and putting on the new nature that was created in the image of Christ (4:17-32). Paul also encouraged the Ephesians to become imitators of God by letting the gospel change their speech, their behavior, and their habits. Rather than yielding to the flesh, they needed to operate in the power of the Holy Spirit (5:1-21). Paul reminded them that the gospel also changes family relationships (5:22–6:9). He encouraged families to live in ways that would portray the gospel of Christ.

At the end of Ephesians, Paul reminded the Ephesians that even though God had already defeated Satan, they still had some battles to fight. He encouraged them to ready themselves for warfare and stand in the weapons and armor that God had provided for them. God had won the war as the ultimate Warrior, but they still had battles to fight (Eph. 6:10-20). These battles would be fought with much support through prayer and preaching the gospel. Paul closed his letter by greeting the saints and by endorsing Tychicus, who would deliver the letter and inform the Ephesians of Paul’s current situation of imprisonment.

The tone of Paul’s letter is pastoral, and the themes revolve around his desire to see God at work in the lives of His church. The prominent themes in Ephesus that keep reappearing in the letter include grace, the lordship of Christ, the mystery of the gospel, and the church. Throughout the letter he keeps returning to these themes. Paul loved the church in Ephesus, and he hoped that they would live “to the praise of His glorious grace” (Eph. 1:6).

OUTLINE OF EPHESIANS

I. A New Life (1:1–3:21)
   a. Greeting (1:1-2)
   b. The Purpose of Christ (1:3-14)
   c. Paul’s First Prayer (1:15-23)
   d. Salvation through Grace (2:1-10)
   e. Unity Restored (2:11-22)
   f. Mystery Revealed (3:1-13)
   g. Paul’s Second Prayer (3:14-21)

II. A New Walk (4:1–6:24)
   a. Walk Worthy (4:1-16)
   b. A New Self (4:17-32)
   c. Imitators of God (5:1-21)
   d. Right Relationships (5:22–6:9)
   e. Readied for Warfare (6:10-20)
   f. Closing (6:21-24)
Rejoice

God chose to provide the blessings of salvation through Jesus’ sacrifice.

Ephesians 1:3-14

Memory Verse: Ephesians 1:7

Read Ephesians 1:1-14, First Thoughts (p. 14), and Understand the Context (p. 14). As you read the Scripture passage, note each occurrence of the phrase “in Christ.” Consider how that phrase is significant to you.

Study Ephesians 1:3-14, using Explore the Text (pp. 15–19). As you read the Scripture passage, note any words related to praising God or rejoicing. In the margin of your leader guide, write the reasons Paul gave for rejoicing.

Plan the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 20–21), More Ideas (p. 22), and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible. Add variety to your plans for your group in this session by using at least one idea from More Ideas.

Gain insights from the weekly podcast on Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/ExploreTheBible).

Gather the following items: ☐ Personal Study Guides; ☐ Trophies, ribbons, certificates, and other awards of achievement; ☐ A large sheet of paper and markers or a dry-erase board or chalkboard, and for More Ideas (p. 22): ☐ A document with a legal seal or stamp, such as a passport. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: ☐ Pack Item 1 (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys); and ☐ Pack Item 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus). Make copies of: ☐ Pack Item 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark).
FIRST THOUGHTS

People who have a goal for their lives and follow a clear plan for accomplishing that goal fascinate us. Everything they do appears to be tied to that goal. We admire their determination and focus. At the same time, we forget that God has a goal or purpose for His creation, and He is focused on that goal. God does not work randomly but is moving His creation to fulfill His purposes. Paul explained that believers are the benefactors of God’s purposes, as He chose to bring us salvation through His Son.

(In PSG, p. 10) How would you describe the purpose of creation? How do you see history moving to accomplish that purpose?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 1:1-14

The opening verses of Ephesians set the stage for the remainder of the letter. Paul referred to himself as the writer in two places (Eph. 1:1; 3:1). In the first verse he referred to himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will.” In the second reference he called himself “the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles.” As an apostle to both Jews and Gentiles, Paul wrote this letter to all the “faithful saints in Christ Jesus at Ephesus.”

The city of Ephesus was originally a Greek colony, but by Paul’s day it had become the capital of the Roman province of Asia. Located in present-day Turkey, it was positioned at the center of several major trade routes throughout the Roman Empire. It had a harbor that opened into the Cayster River and emptied into the Aegean Sea. However, Ephesus was more than a cultural center; it served as the headquarters of the cult dedicated to the goddess Artemis (or Diana). The temple to Artemis had become one of the Seven Wonders of the World, and Paul’s preaching of the gospel had threatened this powerful cult. (See Acts 19:23-41.)

Paul had brought the gospel to Ephesus. Initially, he found some who were followers of John the Baptist and led them to faith in Jesus (Acts 19:1-5). He entered the synagogue there and preached Jesus. For two years he remained in Ephesus preaching the gospel (19:8-10). He opposed the demonic and did signs and wonders in Ephesus without much repercussion (19:11-20). When he opposed the idolatry of the Artemis cult, he began to experience significant opposition (19:21-27). A riot took place in the city, and Paul left Ephesus (19:28-41). He then corresponded with the church by letter, which we have in the Letter to the Ephesians.

Paul wrote this letter to keep the gospel in the minds of those who lived in such a religiously plural environment. He probably intended it to be read
in other churches as well. Paul wrote to a city and a region that had many gods, and few thought of any of them as exclusive. People could worship multiple deities without threatening their commitment to other deities. However, this was not true of Judaism, and it certainly was not true of the gospel message that Paul brought about Jesus Christ.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

CHOSEN (EPH. 1:3-6)

Paul began his letter to the Ephesians by rejoicing in God’s provision for His people. Referring to the triune God, he reminded his readers that they were chosen by God (1:3-6), redeemed by Jesus (1:7-12), and sealed by the Holy Spirit (1:13-14). This whole section, Ephesians 1:3-14, is made up of one long and complex sentence in Greek.

VERSE 3
The section begins with a reference to God as blessed. Because God is blessed, we are the beneficiaries of many of His blessings, several of which Paul named. In fact, Paul described the believer as having every spiritual blessing in the heavens. This is one of five occasions in Ephesians where he referred to the heavens. (See also 1:20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12.) It is a reference to the realm of spiritual blessings rather than a geographic location of the blessings. These are blessings brought to us in Christ. That phrase, in Christ, referred to the union between God and man that was secured through a relationship with Christ. It was a favorite expression of Paul’s for salvation. Before Paul listed the blessings given by God, he located those blessings in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

VERSES 4-6
Paul indicated that God chose us in him, before the foundation of the world. Paul affirmed the fact that God had chosen believers as He had chosen the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. The same Greek word in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) is used to refer to the choosing of Israel. Indeed, the Old Testament speaks of God having chosen Abraham (Neh. 9:7), Aaron (Ps. 105:26), David (1 Kings 11:34; Ps. 78:70), Eli’s father (1 Sam. 2:28), and Jacob ( Isa. 41:8). This was language used of Jesus as well in Luke 9:35, “Then a voice came from the cloud, saying: “This is my Son, the Chosen One; listen to him!”

God had begun to make provision for sin before man had even sinned.

God’s election is not a matter of boasting or pride. God chose the weak to confound the wise (1 Cor. 1:27-28). He chose us before the foundation of the world. God had begun to make provision for sin before man had even

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sinned. He took the initiative in reaching down to sinful humanity, and if He had not done so, nobody would be saved. This doesn’t preclude the necessity of faith. Tony Merida stated, “Election and faith belong in the same sentence, and it is a sentence only God could write.”

God’s purpose in election was that we might be holy and blameless in love before him. Salvation in its broadest sense does not refer only to what happens after death but to the transformation wrought in a person’s heart as he or she meets Christ. To be blameless is to be free from blemish. This is used of Jesus (Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:19), the church (Eph. 5:27), and Christians (2 Pet. 3:14; Jude 24).

Using the language of election, Paul explained that God predestined us. This word meant “to mark out beforehand.” The language of predestination is used in the Bible six times. (See Acts 4:28; Rom. 8:29,30; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:5,11.) Believers are predestined to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ. Election was with a view to adoption. Adoption carried with it all the privileges of a natural-born child. Through God’s purposeful love, He took us and adopted us into His own family, declaring we are His own children with all the rights of a natural heir.

The adoption is not based on the qualities of the child being adopted but purely on the good pleasure of God’s will. God desired to be kind to us when we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8). This was a source of great rejoicing by Paul as he recounted the blessings of God.

The only proper response to God’s choosing and adopting us is not arrogance or pride but the praise of his glorious grace. Like an orphaned child without hope in the world, God went to the orphanage, chose us, and adopted us into His family. This was not based on the merit of the saved but on the graciousness of God. He lavished His grace upon us by sending His Beloved One, Jesus Christ.

The Ephesians lived in a place where people chose their gods. Paul spoke of a God who chose them.

Can you imagine this message in the culture of Ephesus? The Ephesians lived in a place where people chose their gods. Paul spoke of a God who chose them. People of Ephesus were not asking whether they should worship, but rather, they were asking which god they should worship. Paul answered the question by demonstrating God’s action of sending Jesus Christ.

Why is it important to remember that election in this passage is a prelude to worship rather than a doctrine to be debated?
VERSE 7-8
• Redemption was the term used for the payment for a slave’s freedom. This payment was made according to the riches of God’s grace. It was neither deserved nor earned. Redemption came through the blood of Jesus. His blood paid the penalty of the sin debt that gripped sinners. Since all people are sinners (Rom. 3:23), all are enslaved to its effects. But through Christ, redemption is linked with three important concepts.

First, redemption is further described as the forgiveness of our trespasses. A trespass is any deviation from the right path. The need of those who have crossed God’s boundaries is forgiveness, a term that meant to loosen something from whatever binds it. Sin bound humanity, but through the blood of Jesus people can be set free from its enslavement. Second, redemption is connected to God’s grace. It is not earned but freely given. Third, redemption was given with all wisdom and understanding. God not only gave salvation, He also gave the ability to know how to live in light of it.

VERSE 9-10
God’s plan went beyond the salvation of individual sinners. His ultimate desire was to bring everything together in Christ. History is headed in a direction. God’s desire is that both things in heaven and things on earth all come together in Christ. Jesus had taught His disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10-11). A quick glimpse at the world today reveals this prayer has not been fully answered. Sin is rampant. Hatred and war rule over the kingdom of this world. But a day is coming when everything will come together in Christ.

The word plan was used for the administration of a household. As a manager took stewardship over the household, God has taken stewardship over His creation. This plan was unfolded by the mystery of his will. The word mystery is used throughout Ephesians (3:3,9; 5:32; 6:19), but it does not mean the same thing as what we often think. To us, a mystery is something that is unknown or unsolved. In Paul’s use of the word, a mystery was a truth once hidden but now revealed. God has always had a careful plan to redeem that which was affected by the fall, but He waited until the proper time to reveal that plan.

VERSE 11-12
Because we have been adopted into God’s family, we also receive an inheritance. Natural born heirs and adopted heirs receive the same inheritance. In addition to forgiveness (1:7) and insight (1:9), those adopted in God’s kingdom receive an inheritance that is worthy of praise to the Father. Israel had been regarded as the Lord’s inheritance and portion, and now the church as the new Israel enters into that same privilege (Rom. 8:17; Gal. 3:29; Col. 1:12). Individual believers enter into that same arrangement.

Paul reminded the Ephesians that this was because of the purpose of God’s will rather than their own effort or work. God graciously sent His Son
to the world to pay for sin and effect redemption, and this led to the adoption and inheritance of many. Again, keep in mind the context. Paul was rejoicing with the Ephesians in the salvation God graciously provided for them.

Those **who had already put our hope in Christ** was a reference to the Jews. They were the ones who carried the hope of a future coming of the Messiah. The Gentiles carried no such hope (Eph. 2:12). This further highlights **praise to his glory.** God is such a glorious God that He has provided adoption for all those who would come to faith in Him through Jesus.

God chose the Jews to be a light to the Gentiles (Isa. 49:6). He did not choose them because they were good but because they were weak. Through them, He would display His salvation to all the nations. What was true of the Jews is true of individuals as well. God’s election was not to produce a superior race of people, but to display His saving power to the world. Evangelism was always on the heart of God.

**How does the doctrine of election encourage rather than discourage evangelism?**

**SEALED (EPH. 1:13-14)**

**VERSE 13**

13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

Paul rejoiced that Christians had received the **promised Holy Spirit.** Ezekiel had shared of God’s plan to put a new heart and a new spirit within His followers. He also revealed that this was His Spirit (Ezek. 36:26-27; 37:14). The prophet Joel had predicted that God would pour out His Spirit on all humanity (Joel 2:28). He said that in that time “everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (Joel 2:32). The day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) had provided the occasion for God to fulfill this promise. But this was not for Pentecost alone. This promise was fulfilled to all who **heard the word of truth,** and it was given the moment they **believed.** Paul had no qualms about connecting election with the faith of the individual believer. Election and faith worked hand in hand in the **gospel of their salvation.**

In Christ, believers are **sealed** with the Holy Spirit. A seal was a mark of ownership in the ancient world. All of a person’s significant possessions were marked with the impression of the seal. This could have included letters, which had the wax imprint of an owner’s seal, or it could have been attached to goods being transported to indicate ownership and secure protection while in route. Though salvation begins at the moment a person believes, it is not completed in its entirety until after death or the return of Christ. The seal of the Holy Spirit signifies God’s ownership and protection to complete what He has started in the life of the believer. (See Phil. 1:6.)
VERSE 14
Having referred to the Holy Spirit as a seal, Paul also called Him the *down payment of our inheritance*. This was a term related to business or commerce. It could be translated as “down payment,” “deposit,” or “earnest money.” This was an initial payment to make sure the full payment would be made at a later date. The reference to the Spirit as both a *seal* and a *down payment* was used by Paul in writing to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:21-22). He again used the term *down payment* to demonstrate that though the Spirit is given at conversion, His complete work of transformation in us is not completed until later (2 Cor. 5:5). Romans 8:23 describes the receiving of the Spirit as the firstfruits of what God will do in our lives. We receive the Spirit at salvation, and then the Spirit begins to work to make us like Christ. However, the receiving of the Spirit is the down payment guaranteeing that God will finish what He started in us.

The receiving of the Spirit is the down payment guaranteeing that God will finish what He started in us.

The Holy Spirit remains the down payment until the *redemption of the possession* is complete. Though believers have received the forgiveness of trespasses (Eph. 1:7) and the seal of the Holy Spirit (1:13), they are still a work in progress. So, is there any hope that their salvation is secure? That hope comes from everything Paul mentioned in this passage. The Father chose them. The Son redeemed them. The Holy Spirit sealed them. All of these were acts of God’s gracious character. If salvation is not a work of man, then neither is keeping salvation a work of man. As the seal and the down payment, the Holy Spirit guarantees the salvation of all believers, giving them confidence that God will finish what He started in them. Again, this fact magnifies God’s *glory*. In a culture where people could choose whatever god they wanted and as many as they wanted, Paul highlighted reasons to rejoice. God had chosen them, and Jesus had redeemed them. And now the Holy Spirit had put His seal upon them, pledging to hold them and keep them until the redemption project was complete. The Ephesians had experienced many blessings of God in salvation, and they had reason to rejoice.

How does the gospel of grace give assurance to the believer? Why does a works-based salvation lead to uncertainty?

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

GUIDE: Display a number of different trophies, ribbons, and certificates of achievement. Lead group members to discuss awards or recognitions they have received. Which award or achievement meant the most? Ask: What was the selection criteria for the award? Explain: There are some awards we work very hard for, and we feel either proud of the accomplishment if we win or discouraged if we lose. Then there are those recognitions we weren’t expecting, and we often feel humbled and grateful to be recognized in such a way.

ASK: When we think about being chosen by God, do we tend to view it as an award we work hard for or a recognition we are humbled by?

TRANSITION: In Ephesians 1, we learn we have been chosen for an unbelievable honor—to be in Christ! Being chosen drives us to focus not on the skills of the recipients but on the generosity of the Giver.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

HIGHLIGHT: Point to Pack Item 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus) and explain from Understand the Context (PSG, p. 11) that Ephesus was a large, influential city in Paul’s day. Identify the location of Ephesus on Pack Item 1 (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys). Suggest that the residents of Ephesus must have felt very proud and privileged to live in such an important city. But just as none of us gets to choose where we’re born, there probably wasn’t anyone in Paul’s audience who could take credit for the importance of the city.

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Ephesians 1:3-6. Encourage the group to listen for phrases describing God’s initiative.

ASK: Did you hear anything in verses 3-6 that suggest anything we did to deserve being chosen? If not, then what was God’s motivation, according to verse 4?

STATE: What human beings call “love” is often very conditional. You’ve probably experienced relationships where you felt like the other person was saying “I love you ‘if’...” or “I love you ‘because’...” But when Paul says that God chose us “in love,” there were no conditions attached.

DISCUSS: Invite anyone who has gone through or been close to the adoption process to share his or her experience. Ask: In what ways is adoption an even stronger illustration of God’s relationship with us than biological childbirth?

ASK: How should God’s choosing us impact our view of life? How should His choice to offer salvation impact our attitude toward God? In what way should you live differently because of it? (PSG, p. 14)

TRANSITION: A family can choose to adopt a newborn baby and see that baby as innocent, unspoiled, and morally neutral. But what if you aren’t adopting a newborn, but instead an older child who has some baggage in his background? Here’s where we start to see the difference between being “chosen” and being “redeemed.”

READ: Invite someone to read aloud Ephesians 1:7-12. Guide the group to listen for God’s purposes to our redemption.
**ASK:** Why did God go to the trouble of redeeming us? Point to verses 10 and 12.

**DIRECT:** Ask for two volunteers to read Leviticus 25:25-27 and Leviticus 25:47-49. Explain that in the Year of Jubilee, provision was made for restoring land to its original owner if it had been sold to someone else. This is where our concept for redemption originates.

**ASK:** In this illustration, human beings are like the valuable land that’s being restored to its original owner. How does this idea help us understand our salvation?

**EMPHASIZE:** Point out that Ephesians 1:7 is the memory verse for the week. Distribute copies of Pack Item 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark). Note that the group can use this as a tool for tracking the verses they memorize throughout the study.

**ASK:** How are redemption and forgiveness related? How does the truth that Jesus is the only way to gain redemption serve as motivation to share the gospel with others? (PSG, p. 15)

**SUMMARIZE:** Point out that when Paul used the word “mystery” in verse 9, he didn’t mean that God’s will is a secret to be uncovered or a puzzle to be solved. Instead, Paul described God’s will as a “mystery” because it can only be understood by revelation from God Himself. (Explain that we will get into this concept in even more detail in Session 5 of this study.)

**TRANSITION:** Typically, when something valuable changes hands, a legal document bearing the seal of a notary establishes ownership. In the final section of verses, we’re going to see how God has established proof of ownership over our lives.

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read Ephesians 1:13-14. While he or she is reading, write the words Sealed, Heard, and Believed on the board. Lead the group to identify the proper order for these three steps, according to verses 13-14.

**SUMMARIZE:** Use the information on page 18 of this leader guide about the purpose of the seal to discuss what Paul meant by our being sealed with the Holy Spirit.

**ASK:** How does the sealing of the Holy Spirit give a believer confidence to fulfill God’s purposes? (PSG, p. 17)

**DISCUSS:** When we make a down payment on a major purchase, we get to experience the benefits of the purchase, even though it isn’t fully ours yet. We still get to live in the house or drive the car, despite the fact that we have only made an initial payment. This is similar to what Paul meant when he said the Holy Spirit is a down payment of our inheritance.

**ASK:** How does the gospel of grace build assurance into the life of the believer? (PSG, p. 17)

**SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)**

**REVIEW:** Invite volunteers to read the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 18). Then ask: How can we express humility and confidence at the same time?

**CHALLENGE:** Call attention to the third set of questions under In My Context (PSG, p. 18): List ways to offer praise this week to God for His salvation. Include both private and public means of offering praise including service to others. What action will you take this week as an act of praise for God choosing to provide Jesus for our salvation?

**PRAY:** Lead in a time of sharing prayers of praise, as well as any prayer requests.
PRACTICE

• Identify group members whose attendance may have dropped recently. Encourage them this week, emphasizing that the start of a new unit of study is a great time to get back into the habit of participating in group life.

• Organize a group outing to see the movie Overcomer. Encourage the group to look for themes found in Ephesians that are presented in the movie.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace the focus idea on page 20, form small teams of no more than five. Explain to them that they are the selection committee who will determine the criteria of a certain award, which they will draw from a hat. Here are the categories: sports play of the week; most important news story of the month; movie of the year; outstanding leader in your community or church. After allowing the group to work, invite a representative to share the criteria they agreed upon. The point of this is not to debate the award itself, but to get them to consider their selection criteria.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

• For further examination of Ephesians 1:3-6, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 12 of the PSG.

• To supplement the discussion of Ephesians 1:5, invite a group member or special guest to share his or her adoption story. Or consider asking someone who was adopted to share with the group how it felt to be chosen.

• To enhance your understanding of Ephesians 1:13, bring your diploma, passport, or any other document with a legal seal or stamp. Discuss how the seal legitimizes your ownership, or achievement, or legal rights. Read Philippians 3:12-13, pointing out that we continue to pursue the goal with the confidence that one day we will fully own all the blessings of our inheritance.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Guide the group to journal about a time in their lives when they have experienced God’s glory, whether in the birth of a child, seeing God’s creation, or so on. Challenge group members to think of their own salvation as even more glorious than the most awesome work of God’s creation they’ve ever seen.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

To close the session, play the song “Adopted,” by Jimmy McNeal. Lead group members to listen to the song while they focus on the message of Ephesians 1:3-7.
Remembered

God helps believers understand the riches and greatness of His calling on their lives.

**EPHESIANS 1:15-23**

**MEMORY VERSE: EPHESIANS 1:18**

- **READ** Ephesians 1:15-23, First Thoughts (p. 24), and Understand the Context (p. 24). Pay attention to the specific prayers Paul prayed on behalf of the Ephesians.

- **STUDY** Ephesians 1:15-23, using Explore the Text on pages 25–29. Review **PACK ITEM 1** (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys), noting that Paul visited Ephesus during both his second and third missionary journeys.

- **PLAN** the group time, using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 30–31) and More Ideas (p. 32). Focus on the main idea that God helps believers understand the riches and greatness of His calling on their lives. Consider ways to use the Suggested Music Idea (p. 32).

- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).

- **GATHER** the following items: □ Personal Study Guides. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: □ **PACK ITEM 1** (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys); and □ **PACK ITEM 2** (Outline of Ephesians). Make copies of: □ **PACK ITEM 7** (Handout: Ephesians Time Line); and □ **PACK ITEM 13** (Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians).
FIRST THOUGHTS

Insight comes from understanding the relationship of cause and effect. Scientists propose theories based on cycles and predictable observed patterns. Sir Isaac Newton posed the theory of gravity based on an apple falling perpendicularly to the ground. The effect revealed the cause. In our Christian lives, we see the realities of cause and effect. Paul prayed that the Ephesian believers would realize the effect salvation through Christ had in their daily lives.

(In PSG, p. 19) How do effects point to a cause in this world? In a person’s spiritual life? Can a cause exist without producing an effect? Explain.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 1:15-23

Paul began his letter to the Ephesians by enumerating some of the blessings God had given them because of their salvation. The Father had chosen them, adopting them into His own family (Eph. 1:3-6). They did nothing to earn it; God had done this because of His graciousness. Jesus had redeemed them through His own blood, offering forgiveness, an inheritance, and wisdom for living (1:7-11). The Holy Spirit had sealed them, showing ownership and protection, and was the down payment promising God would finish what He started in them (1:12-13). All of this was done to the praise of God’s glory.

Having emphasized God’s work in the believer’s life, Paul prayed for the Ephesians in 1:15-23. Paul often began his letters with a prayer of thanksgiving for his recipients. He thanked God for the Romans and prayed that God would give him an opportunity to visit them (Rom. 1:8-10). In First Corinthians, Paul thanked the Lord for the believers there and commended them for their eagerness to display their spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 1:4-10). In Second Corinthians he prayed for their comfort in the face of suffering (2 Cor. 1:3-7). To the Philippians, Paul offered thanks for their partnership in the gospel (Phil. 1:3-11), and to the Colossians he praised the Lord for their faith (Col. 1:3-8).

The notable omission of prayer and thanksgiving in Paul’s letter comes in Galatians, where Paul launched into the problem of them turning away from the Lord to a different gospel (Gal. 1:6). The subject matter was so serious in Galatians that Paul dispensed with any formalities and attacked the problem from the beginning. This was not the case in Ephesians. He had heard of their faith and prayed that God would help them continue to grow in their relationship with the Lord (Eph. 1:15-23). At the time of Paul’s
ministry, Ephesus was the fourth largest city in the world, with a population estimated at 250,000 people. The church was in a strategic location for the gospel. Paul had founded the Christian work there and remained in the city for three years (Acts 20:31). Both Timothy and John would also serve as pastors there. By the end of the first century, the church was still active in ministry, though it had apparently abandoned the first love that it once had (Rev. 2:1-7).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD ( Eph. 1:15-17)

VERSES 15-16
Paul began his letter by enumerating some powerful truths and highlighting some tremendous blessings from God (Eph. 1:3-14). He had spoken of the Father’s choosing them before the foundation of the world (v. 4) and adopting them as His own children (v. 5). Then, he reminded them of the redemption Jesus had purchased for them with His own blood (v. 7). Finally, he reminded them of the Holy Spirit, who sealed them and became the down payment securing their salvation (vv. 13-14). These were the things that Paul would have had in his mind when he introduced the prayer of thanksgiving with the words, this is why. These blessings were ultimately beyond human comprehension, so Paul took this occasion in the letter to pray for more enlightenment.

Paul had received news of the Ephesians’ faithfulness to the Lord. The two qualities of faith and love were also linked together in other letters of Paul (Col. 1:4; 1 Thess. 1:3; 2 Thess. 1:3). Though Paul had witnessed many coming to faith in the Lord Jesus, more continued to come to faith after he left. Paul rejoiced that many had put their faith in Christ. The love they displayed for all the saints was evidence of genuine faith. Outward religious activity was never what assured Paul of faith; rather, it was “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). Jesus had also taught the same truth—that love was evidence of genuine faith (John 13:35).

A church is blessed to have people praying and giving thanks constantly.

When Paul heard about the faith and love of the Ephesian church, he began to give thanks and pray. He reminded them that he was constantly giving thanks for God’s work of grace in their lives. Paul didn’t evangelize and then forget those who had come to faith in Christ through his ministry. Neither did he plant churches and then leave them without support. He constantly prayed for those impacted through his ministry. Therefore, Paul said he would never stop thanking God for the church. A church is blessed to have people praying and giving thanks constantly.

In addition to giving thanks, Paul used the more general word for prayers, the term used most often for prayer in the New Testament.
It occurs thirty-six times as a noun and eighty-five times as a verb. Literally, the Greek says that Paul was making remembrance of them in his prayers. To remember them in prayer infers that he was calling the name of their church before God in prayer. His prayer was ongoing and specific.

VERSE 17

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.

VERSE 18

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints,
Holy Spirit, people live in the darkness of sin with their eyes closed to the gospel. Though Paul believed that the Holy Spirit came to a person’s life at the moment of conversion (Eph. 1:13-14), he also believed that continued growth in knowledge was needed after conversion.

First, Paul prayed that the Ephesians’ eyes would be opened to **know what is the hope of his calling**. Paul often spoke of the relationship he had with God as a calling. Certainly, this had a past dynamic to it. Paul explained to Timothy that God “saved us and called us with a holy calling” (2 Tim. 1:9). However, this calling had continuing influence in the present. Paul implored the Thessalonians to “live worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:12). A past calling carried present implications. Also, the calling of God was to future glory. Paul also reminded the Thessalonians that God had called them so that they might “obtain the glory” of the Lord Jesus (2 Thess. 2:14). Paul saw past, present, and future wrapped up in the calling.

Second, Paul prayed that the Ephesians would know **what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints**. While the inheritance would certainly include the final act of redemption at the return of Christ, it does not have to be that alone. Believers are joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17), but they begin to receive that inheritance immediately upon conversion as the gift of the Spirit is given to those who believe (Eph. 1:13-14). Christians spend a lifetime learning more of what is involved in that inheritance, and they will not receive the full inheritance until after death or the return of Christ.

**VERSE 19**

In verse 18 Paul prayed that the Ephesians’ eyes would be open to their calling and their inheritance. In this verse, he added the **immeasurable greatness of his power**. The term *immeasurable* is used only by Paul in the New Testament. It is a compound word that could literally mean to “throw to the next level.” No matter how much people are able to comprehend the power of God, it pales in comparison to His actual power. It is immeasurable.

In the Ephesians’ worldview, people saw power in magic, astrology, the Artemis cult, and even in the worship of the emperor of Rome. Life was a battle for supremacy and power. People lived in fear of political or spiritual powers. Paul wanted to make sure the Ephesian believers understood even more deeply that God’s power was unrivaled.

In verse 19 Paul used four different Greek terms for **power**. The first is the general word **power**. It was used of the miracles of Christ and seemed to be an umbrella for all the other words related to power. A second word used of power in this passage is **mighty**. It too was used both of Jesus’ miracles (Luke 1:51) and the authority to rule over something as strong as death (Heb. 2:14). A third word, **working**, is where we get our English word for **energy**. It was the output of power at work. The final word, **strength**, was used for physical, mental, or spiritual power. Though it is difficult to distinguish between the use of the four words, the presence of all four as synonyms in this passage heightens the prayer request for believers to comprehend the power of God.
How are the three requests of Paul in verses 18-19 related to each other? How does growing in each area lead to greater understanding and praise of God for His salvation?

POWER OF GOD (EPH. 1:20-23)

Having prayed for enlightenment in the believer’s heart concerning the power of God, Paul expanded on that theme in verses 20-23. In these four verses Paul called attention to four things God did in Christ that demonstrated His power: He raised Jesus from the dead, seated Him at His right hand, subjected everything to Him, and gave Him headship over the church.

If God can raise the dead, is there anything that He cannot do?

VERSES 20-21

God exercised this power in Christ by raising him from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus was a central tenant in Paul’s gospel presentation. (See 1 Cor. 15:4,7; Gal. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:10.) If God can raise the dead, is there anything that He cannot do? Second, God demonstrated His power by seating him at his right hand in the heavens. This was a reference to Jesus’ ascension.

Though it was not mentioned as much as the resurrection, the ascension was a crucial part of the gospel story. (See Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9.) God not only reversed the process of death in the resurrection, but He transcended it by enthroning Jesus next to Him in heaven. This probably was an allusion to Psalm 110:1, “This is the declaration of the Lord to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” As the extension of David’s line of kingship, Jesus sat forever on the throne next to His Father, putting all His enemies, including death, under His feet.

In addition to resurrecting Christ and seating Him on the throne in heaven, God showed His power by subjecting every enemy to Jesus’ authority. Jesus is superior to every competitor for His throne. Paul stated that God placed Christ far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion. Whether earthly or spiritual, all who claim authority fall under the authority of Christ. Paul emphasized that Christ had authority over every title given. Literally, this says in Greek, “every name that is named.” In other words, if you can name an authority, Jesus has ascended far above that authority.
God has subjected everything under the feet of Jesus. Perhaps the language of Psalm 8:6 was in Paul’s mind here. Not only was everything inferior to Christ but all was subjected to Him. Though Jesus had taken the sin of humanity upon Himself and died for our sins, God had raised Him and seated Him in a place of absolute authority. This was a powerful demonstration of the power of God. Only God could do that.

Every decision and every direction for the church should be set by the Lord Jesus Christ.

God also appointed him as head over everything for the church. The head of all things is also the head of the church. Every body has a head, and Jesus is that head for His church. He is head of everything for the church. Every decision and every direction for the church should be set by the Lord Jesus Christ. Only as the body comes under the head can it move and be useful.

In verse 23, Paul arrived at one of his loftiest descriptions of the church. First, he called the church Christ’s body. This was not the only place Paul made this association. (See Eph. 4:12,16; 5:30; Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:27; Col. 1:24; 2:19.) Paul viewed the church as an organism rather than merely an organization. It had life as it was connected to its head, Jesus Christ. As the body was subjected to the head, so should the church be subjected to Christ.

The next description of the church has caused much discussion and several different interpretations. Paul described the body as the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way. The different interpretations can be expressed in three primary ways. First, the church is filled by Christ, and Christ fills the world completely through the church. In this view, the church receives all it needs from Christ and participates with Him as His purposes are accomplished in the world. The second interpretation is that the church is filled by Christ, who, in turn is filled completely by God. In this view, Christ fills His church as He is filled by God. The Bible does emphasize Christ as the fullness of God. (See Col. 1:19; 2:9.) The third main interpretation of this verse is that the church fills up Christ as more and more members are incorporated into His body. Though each of these interpretations could be possible, the first one seems to hit at the meaning of this passage. God’s power is best seen in the fact that Christ, who is Himself the fullness of God, fills all things in every way, and the church participates with Him in extending His work to the world. The church should be a demonstration of God’s power as it relates to its head, Jesus.

What are characteristics of a church operating under the authority of Jesus?
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

WELCOME: Read or summarize the illustration about the relationship of cause and effect from the first paragraph of the PSG (p. 19). Ask: What are some other examples from daily life where the effect reveals the cause? (Examples: symptoms reveal an illness, a growling stomach reveals hunger, sunrise reveals daytime, and so on)

DISCUSS: Invite the group to share specific examples of effects that reveal a person’s relationship with Christ, and record the list on a board or tear sheet.

EXPLAIN: Our study today focuses on how God helps believers understand the riches and greatness of His calling on their lives.

INTRODUCE: Review key points of the Understand the Context section from the PSG (p. 20). Direct the group to **Pack Item 1** (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys) and **Pack Item 2** (Outline of Ephesians) to give a visual point of reference for the original recipients of this letter. Note the events surrounding Paul’s writing by distributing copies of **Pack Item 7** (Handout: Ephesians Time Line). Highlight the amount of attention Paul gave the Ephesians.

TRANSITION: As we will see from Paul’s prayer in these verses, salvation through Christ has the effect of producing the knowledge of God, hope of God, and power of God in every believer’s life.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Ephesians 1:15-17. As they read, direct the group to circle words or phrases that reveal how Paul felt about his listeners.

SHARE: Briefly discuss what the words or phrases they circled reveal about Paul’s relationship with his listeners. Then read the following statement from the PSG (p. 21): The apostle’s prayer for the Ephesian church was characterized by two important qualities: persistence and gratitude.

DISCUSS: What practical steps could believers take in their daily routines that would help them increase their focus on others for the purpose of praying for them? (PSG, p. 22)

EXPLAIN: Verse 17 reveals the heart of Paul’s intercessory prayers for the Ephesians. He asked God to give the Ephesians a deeper knowledge of Himself (PSG, p. 22). Note that this deeper knowledge comes through the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 13** (Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians) and discuss how each Person of the Trinity is at work in helping us grow in the knowledge of God.

DISCUSS: How does Paul’s prayer for the Ephesian believers compare to most prayers voiced today? How might prayer habits change if the main focus were on spiritual growth? (PSG, p. 22)

TRANSITION: Paul’s prayer for his readers did not stop with their growing in the knowledge of God.

READ: Direct another volunteer to read Ephesians 1:18-19. Encourage the group to listen for the three key truths Paul wanted his readers to understand.
MINI-LECTURE: Using the information under Verses 18-19 (PSG, pp. 23–24), give a brief lecture on the three manifestations of hope Paul wanted his readers’ eyes opened to: (1) the knowledge of the hope of the calling of every believer; (2) the value of the believer’s inheritance of salvation; and (3) the awareness of the greatness of God’s power.

DISCUSS: How are the three requests of Paul in verses 18-19 related to each other? How does growing in each area lead to greater understanding and praise of God for His salvation? (PSG, p. 24)

TRANSITION: In addition to the knowledge of God and the hope of God, Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians included a third request, that they grow in understanding of God’s power.

READ: Call for a volunteer to read Ephesians 1:20-23. Direct the group to listen for evidences of God’s power on display through the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus.

STATE: In verses 20-23, Paul elaborated on some of the most important examples of God’s power that should not be missed—the power of the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus. Paul emphasized that the power seen in Christ’s resurrection and exaltation is the same power that secures a believer’s salvation.

DISCUSS: Why is it important that believers come to understand the power of God at work in the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus? Support the discussion by using key points from the commentary on verses 20-21 in this guide (p. 28).

READ: Call on someone to read the Key Doctrine (God the Son) on page 24 of the PSG. Ask: How does Christ’s being at the right hand of God give a believer security and confidence? (PSG, p. 25)

HIGHLIGHT: Point out from the PSG (p. 26): Why did God make Jesus “head over everything”? Ask: How would you sum up the answer to this question? After discussion, say: Christ’s power is at work in and through the church with the goal of bringing His salvation to the world.

DISCUSS: How has your response to the question on page 26 of the PSG changed as a result of today’s discussion?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Draw attention to the bulleted summaries under In My Context (PSG, p. 27). Challenge the group to pick one of the statements to give focused prayer and attention to in growing in the knowledge of God during the coming week.

CHALLENGE: As a group, discuss the first question set (PSG, p. 27) and decide on one actionable change to make together: Discuss as a group how the prayers of the group can reflect Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians to a greater degree. What changes need to be made to how the group prays for each other?

PRAY: Spend time in prayer for one another, using Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 1:15-23 as a guide. Be sure to put into practice some of the changes the group just mentioned. Close the prayer time by asking God to help your group continue to grow in their understanding of the knowledge, hope, and power of God.
PRACTICE

- Email the group during the week and remind them of the changes you made to the way you pray for one another. Challenge them to connect with one other person from the group this week for whom they will spend more time in intercessory prayer.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

For an alternate Focus Attention activity, create teams. Have each team appoint a leader or spokesperson. Instruct the teams to read Ephesians 1:15-23 together, underlining each phrase that identifies what Paul hoped to see in the lives of the Ephesians. After most have arrived, lead the group to discuss the question from Understand the Context (PSG, p. 20):

How does each phrase relate to a growing understanding of salvation?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- For further discussion of Ephesians 1:18-19, draw attention to the definition of immeasurable under Verse 19 on page 24 of the PSG. Ask: How do you feel when you reflect on the “immeasurable greatness” of God?

- To supplement study of Ephesians 1:20-23, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 26) to highlight Paul’s use of an Old Testament quotation in Ephesians 1:20: Read Psalm 110. Search for answers to the following questions: Why might this psalm be the most cited psalm in the New Testament? (See Acts 2:24-35; 1 Cor. 15:25; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 7:17,21; 1 Pet. 3:22.) What references to the Messiah do you find in the psalm? How does this psalm help you better understand the power of God?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Instruct the group to write out their own one- or two-sentence statements about what the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Christ has changed and is changing in their lives. Lead them to reflect on the final question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 27): How can you use this passage to encourage others who may have doubts about their salvation? Identify one person with whom you will share these truths this week.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Play the song “Same Power,” by Jeremy Camp, while the group reflects on the immeasurably great power of God described in Ephesians 1.
Session 3

Resurrected

God provides salvation by grace through faith apart from our good works.

Ephesians 2:1-10

Memory Verses: Ephesians 2:8-9

Read Ephesians 2:1-10, First Thoughts (p. 34), and Understand the Context (p. 34). As you read Ephesians 2:1-10, notice the contrast of life before salvation and after salvation. Consider what these contrasts reveal about the nature of salvation found through faith in Jesus.

Study Ephesians 2:1-10, using Explore the Text (pp. 35–39). Pay close attention to the words and phrases Paul used to describe God’s character, contrasted with how he described our character. For further insight, consult the Explore the Bible Commentary, found in both print and digital formats at LifeWay.com.

Plan the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 40–41) and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Add variety to your plans for your group in this session by using at least one idea from More Ideas (p. 42). Consider new ways to implement the Suggested Music Idea (p. 42).

Gain insights from the weekly podcast on Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/ExploreTheBible).

Gather the following items: ☐ Personal Study Guides. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: ☐ Pack Item 2 (Outline of Ephesians); ☐ Pack Item 4 (Poster: Ephesians 2: Old and New); and ☐ Pack Item 6 (Key Verses: Ephesians 2:8-9). Make copies of: ☐ Pack Item 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark).
FIRST THOUGHTS

A case can be made that virtually every advertisement and marketing message comes to us in a form of the “before and after” approach. At the very least it can be said that most cosmetic and fitness ads use this approach in which they show a person prior to using the product and then again with the amazing after effects. A subtle variation on this method is the “shock and awe” model, where shocking information is presented and followed up with an amazing solution to the problem.

(In PSG, p. 28) How does a positive change in a person’s life motivate others to make that same change?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

In these verses, Paul painted a stark contrast between what human beings are in their essential nature and what they can become through the grace of God. What we find is a biblical “before and after” picture. Verses 1-3 portray the before picture; verses 4-10 portray the after picture.

A look at the cultural and religious context of Ephesus gives us a clearer view of the contrast between the before and the after. Worship in Ephesus centered around the cult of Diana, the Roman version of the Greek goddess named Artemis. She was the goddess who watched over nature and served as the patron deity of wild animals. She was portrayed as a woman with many breasts, depicting her fertility and nurturing qualities. The temple of Diana was located outside of the city walls of Ephesus in a sacred area dedicated to this cult. This temple was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens. It was one of the seven wonders of the world, causing many to associate the city of Ephesus with Diana. Worshipers regularly processed into the temple with its statues of the goddess and participated in ceremonies led by priests who were eunuchs and priestesses who were virgins. An annual festival hosted many people from the region in a celebration of worship that included music, dancing, and drama. Also, the temple served as a banking center for the city, and an image of Diana appeared on their coinage. The Ephesians worshiped the god in order to secure her protection and care. Paul’s gospel of grace must have sounded so foreign to those involved in temple worship of Diana.

In addition to the cult of Diana, many people in the region were involved in magic and folk beliefs unique to their region. The story is told in Acts 19:13-20 of Paul doing extraordinary miracles there, including healing the sick and driving out evil spirits. A group of Jewish people following the
high priest Sceva attempted an exorcism but were unsuccessful. When the Ephesians heard the story, many of them came “confessing and disclosing their practices” (Acts 19:18). These practices included magic, as evidenced by the fact that they burned their books equaling the cost of 50,000 pieces of silver (Acts 19:19). Again, the religion of the Ephesians was about human works that would commend them to their gods. The gospel would have looked remarkably different than the magic and folk religions of their day.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

ONCE DEAD (EPH. 2:1-3)

VERSES 1-2

Christianity is not a fixer-upper religion but a new construction. After Paul’s prayer for the church in Ephesians (Eph. 1:15-23), he explained the work of Christ in creating the church. Before people come to Christ, they are dead in … trespasses and sins. This does not refer to physical death but spiritual deadness. The word trespasses means the willful crossing of a boundary. The word translated sins is the more general word for sin, meaning “to miss the mark.” We were both rebels and failures, and that left us spiritually dead, unable to relate to God.

Paul said in Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Dead people cannot raise themselves. They need God, the One who has proven He can resurrect the dead. Any attempts by the spiritually dead to make themselves look better, act better, or relate to God better will only end in despair because the need is resurrection, not improvement.

How does spiritual deadness rule out the possibility of salvation by works?

The world says to believe in yourself or pick yourself up by your bootstraps. The Bible says you are dead in your trespasses and sins. Dead people cannot save themselves.

Having declared that those outside of a relationship with Jesus are dead, Paul explained what that condition means. First, he said they lived according to the ways of this world. Though the word used for world does not always carry negative connotations, in this case it does. The ways of this world would include the non-Christian value system that those outside of Christ embrace. The Greek term used for lived means “to walk.” It describes a consistent way of life. Here it means to embrace the values of the world.
outside of Christ. The message of the world is the opposite of the message of Christ. The world says to believe in yourself or pick yourself up by your bootstraps. The Bible says you are dead in your trespasses and sins. Dead people cannot save themselves.

Describing the ways of the world, Paul explained this was according to the ruler of the power of the air. John described Satan as the ruler of the world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Satan was also referred to as the ruler of the demons (Matt. 9:34; 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15). Paul used the term air to mean the abode of the demons. In Jewish cosmology, demons lived in the atmosphere surrounding the earth. They certainly had no place in heaven, but they could dwell in the area surrounding the earth. Satan and his demonic forces were now working in the disobedient. This was a reference to those outside of faith in Christ. John characterized people as either children of God or children of the devil (1 John 3:10). He also called those outside the faith as having the devil for their father (John 8:44).

Why is it inevitable that those outside of faith in Christ will embrace the world’s system?

VERSE 3

We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also.
NOW ALIVE (EPH. 2:4-7)

VERSES 4-5
In verses 1-3, Paul described those outside the faith as lifeless, hopeless, and under condemnation. With one conjunction, but, the situation is reversed. Humanity outside of faith in Christ may be under God’s wrath, but God’s mercy restrains His wrath. Paul described God’s mercy as rich. This is a reminder of Psalm 103:8, which states, “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love.” Why would God display such mercy toward such great sinners? It was because of his great love. God’s mercy flows from His love.

In the previous section, Paul revealed that people were dead in their sins and under the wrath of God. A righteous God would be required to punish sin rather than overlook it. However, in His love, God provided a way that sin could be punished but the sinner go free. Paul wrote in another letter, “But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Instead of punishing us for our sin, God poured His wrath upon His own Son, who deserved none of the punishment. Indeed, this is why Paul called God’s love great.

Because of His great love, God took three incredible actions toward those who have put their faith in Him. First, God made us alive with Christ. With the same certainty that God raised Jesus from the dead after the cross, He raises us from spiritual death and saves us by grace. The word grace is used twelve times in Ephesians. Those who have been raised from spiritual death to life cannot take credit for that miracle but can only marvel at the power of God to do the seemingly impossible. The word grace in verse 5 is a perfect tense verb, meaning it is action that started in the past but has continuing results in the present and future. Literally it could read, You have been saved by grace. We were saved by grace in the past, and we continue to be saved by grace in the present. Christians are now alive because of what God has done for them and what He continues to do in them.

How does the image of new birth encourage humility in a believer?

VERSE 6
A second action that God took on behalf of believers was He raised us up with him. This is a compound verb that begins with a prefix meaning “together with.” It is the word from which we get our English word sync. In sync with Jesus, we have been made alive and raised. This is a reference to the ascension of Jesus. In the same way that Jesus ascended to be with His Father, we have been raised with Him spiritually.

Why did God raise us? He seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus. Paul previously mentioned that God had blessed Christians with every spiritual blessing in the heavens (Eph. 1:3). So here he emphasized
again that the believer has been raised to sit enthroned with Christ in the heavens. As believers identify with the death and resurrection of Jesus, they are seated in His authority. Paul stated in 2 Timothy 2:11, “This saying is trustworthy: For if we died with him, we will also live with him.” This is not speaking of a resurrection of our bodies, which is still in the future. Rather, this is a present participation with Christ in His resurrection. As God vindicated Christ in His resurrection, He vindicates us from our sin based on our identification with Christ.

VERSE 7
7 so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

VERSE 7
Why would God be so gracious to sinners? This verse gives the reason. He desires to display the immeasurable riches of his grace. God’s grace is magnified every time a sinner is saved. If the sinner could save himself, it would magnify the sinner’s qualities. But since the sinner is dead in sin, only God can raise him. This is done to show his kindness to us. This kindness is not indiscriminately applied to every person, but only those in Christ Jesus. God’s saving grace will not cover those who refuse to believe in Jesus.

God’s work in saving the believer demonstrates His grace in the coming ages. Those whom God has brought to life, raised, and seated in the heavens are living trophies of His grace now, but they will forever be testimonies of His grace and kindness.

THROUGH GRACE ALONE (EPH. 2:8-10)

VERSES 8-9
8 For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift — 9 not from works, so that no one can boast.

Believing that salvation is achieved by human means is thinking too highly of oneself and too lowly of the power of sin and death.

While the sole basis of salvation is God’s grace, Paul clarified that it is received through faith. In other letters, Paul emphasized the individual’s responsibility of receiving this salvation. (See Rom. 3:22,25; Gal. 2:16; 1 Pet. 1:5.) However, salvation by faith is God’s gift. Believing that salvation is achieved by human means is thinking too highly of oneself and too lowly of the power of sin and death. Salvation is the gift that God gave. God is the One who works in us unto salvation, but we have a responsibility to receive by faith what He offers.
**Why do you think Paul emphasized so strongly that salvation was a gift of God rather than a work of humanity?**

In order to exclude any thought that salvation is a human work, Paul added: *not from works, so that no one can boast.* One cannot achieve salvation by doing good works or by keeping the law. In Romans, Paul declared that a person is justified by faith apart from keeping the law (Rom. 3:28). He added that Abraham was justified by faith and not works, and that was before the law was even given (Rom. 4:1-4). Paul reminded Titus that God saves us not by our works of righteousness but by the power of the Holy Spirit in regeneration (Titus 3:5). Paul is consistently clear that a person cannot earn salvation by being good or doing good. This excludes all boasting on the part of those who are saved. The one who is worthy of praise in the salvation event is God.

**VERSE 10**

Knowing that salvation is a work of God, Paul declared that Christians are *his workmanship.* In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word translated *workmanship* is used of God’s material creation (Ps. 92:4; Eccl. 3:11). It could also be used to describe a pot created by a potter or a poem written by an author. This has led some translators to use the terms “masterpiece,” “handiwork,” or “work of art.” In the beginning, humanity was the work of God. After sin soiled that creation, God worked a new creation in the lives of those who trust in Him by faith.

**Good works are the fruit of salvation, not the root of it.**

Though salvation is not achieved by good works, it does produce good works after salvation is received. Again using the language of creation, Paul declared that Christians were *created in Christ Jesus for good works.* Good works are the fruit of salvation, not the root of it. Paul consistently denied that human works contributed to salvation. He also consistently affirmed that those who were saved would manifest good works. (See 1 Cor. 15:58; 2 Cor. 9:8; Col. 1:10; 2 Thess. 2:17; 1 Tim. 2:10; 6:18; 2 Tim. 2:21; 3:17; Titus 2:7,14.) Finally, Paul described these good works as those *which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.* This likely describes not specific individual works but a pattern of life for all those who have been saved and delivered by God’s salvation. The past, present, and future aspects of salvation all come together in this passage. In times past God provided a Savior, in the present we receive Him by faith, and in the future God will completely deliver us from the power of sin.
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: On a board or large sheet of paper, make two columns, headed Before and After. Direct the group to think about things that emphasize before and after transformations (examples: a home improvement show, a diet plan, an advertising claim, or a personal hobby). Invite volunteers to call out words or phrases that describe the state of the before item prior to its restoration and after the metamorphosis. Ask: Why are advertising campaigns based on before and after photos and testimonies so effective?

GUIDE: Using Pack Item 2 (Outline of Ephesians), point out that today’s discussion from Ephesians will show the contrast of life before Christ with life after Christ.

INTRODUCE: We often talk about life-or-death situations when we’re trying to communicate the urgency of taking action. In Ephesians 2, Paul discussed salvation in life-or-death terms. His description of the before state of humanity, while grim, is necessary because it helps us appreciate the result of having Christ in our lives.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Ephesians 2:1-3 and the others to listen for descriptions of the spiritually dead. Invite the group to call out descriptions as you list them on the board.

EXPLAIN: Spiritual deadness doesn’t mean a lack of activity. Instead, those who are spiritually dead are very active, but in sinful and destructive ways. Those without Christ remain under the strongholds of the sinful nature—defying God and exalting self.

ASK: How does Paul’s description of life without Jesus serve as motivation to share Jesus with others? (PSG, p. 32)

TRANSITION: The change Jesus makes when He comes into someone’s life isn’t a change from bad to good; it’s a change from dead to alive.

READ: Call for a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 2:4-7. Direct the group to listen for what many people think are the two most important words of the gospel.

DISCUSS: Whenever there is a before-and-after moment, someone makes a conscious decision to change something. A homeowner decides to renovate. An overweight person decides to exercise. In these verses, who makes the decision to initiate a change? God initiates change in our lives when we receive Him. That’s why two of the most important words are “But God.”

DISCUSS: What’s the difference between mercy and grace? According to verse 6, what was God’s motivation for making us alive? According to verse 7, what is His desired result?

MINI-LECTURE: Present a mini lecture on Paul’s background, based on Philippians 3:4-14. Emphasize that Paul didn’t describe his former way of life as evil or wicked, but as loss or rubbish because it was done apart from Christ. This would also be a great opportunity to share your own before-and-after testimony.
DISCUSS: Invite the group to share a time they may have gotten an invitation somewhere because of someone they knew or someone they were with. Direct someone to identify the verses using the word “with” in Ephesians 2:5-6. Ask: How significant is it that we’re in relationship with Christ? How does the changed life of a believer serve as a display of God’s grace and character? (PSG, p. 33)

TRANSITION: So far, Paul has focused on the “what” of salvation—we were dead but are now alive. Paul turned his attention to “how.” How does this transformation happen?

READ: Call on a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 2:8-10. Point out that verses 8-9 are this week’s memory verses, and distribute copies of Pack Item 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark) to anyone who doesn’t have one yet. Point out Pack Item 6 (Key Verses: Ephesians 2:8-9). Point out that verse 9 clarifies that we’re not saved by good works, while verse 10 emphasizes that we’re saved for good works. Ask: What’s the difference?

GUIDE: Direct attention to Pack Item 4 (Poster: Ephesians 2: Old and New). Using the poster, lead group members to discuss the difference between the Old Life and the New Life. Call for group members to identify additional contrasts we can draw from verses 8-10. List those on the poster or a board.

SUMMARIZE: Review the paragraph under Verses 8-9 on page 34 of the PSG. Ask: Why is pride so antithetical to the gospel?

GUIDE: Direct the group to find partners (two people may comprise a team). Lead the partners to take turns explaining their answer to this question: What would you say to someone who was convinced they had to work to earn God’s approval or salvation? Reassemble the group. Allow volunteers to share insights gained.

ASK: How do our reasons for doing good things relate to our understanding of salvation? What do our motives reveal about our beliefs about salvation? (PSG, p. 35) How has your understanding of faith and good works changed as a result of this study?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Call on volunteers to read the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 36) to present a summary of the study. Then invite others to respond to this question: How can we develop a greater sense of urgency and more frequently share our faith?

CHALLENGE: Direct the group to turn to the inside front cover of their copy of the Personal Study Guide and silently read the plan of salvation, while you play some background music. (See the Suggested Music Idea on p. 42.) Tell the group that you will be contacting them this week by text or email, and that if they are unsure of their own salvation, you would be honored to talk with them about it. If they are confident of their salvation, direct them to pray for a friend, family member, or coworker who is not a believer.
PRACTICE

• Work on the memory verse for this session (Eph. 2:8-9). Search the Internet for art to go along with this verse that you can text to group members throughout the week.

• Commit to contacting each member of your group this week, emphasizing your willingness to talk with them if they have any questions or concerns about their salvation. Keep your schedule as clear as possible to make room for any opportunities for conversation.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace the Focus Attention activity, lead the group to discuss the differences between a trophy you get for winning, an award you get for service, and a grant you get for need. Explain that when someone wins a competition, we often admire the recipient for their talent or determination. But when someone is the recipient of a gift, grant, or scholarship, we admire the generosity of the giver.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

• To supplement the discussion of Ephesians 2:1-3, lead the group to consider the difference between a testimony involving a radical change (such as someone getting saved out of a life of crime or addiction) and a testimony from someone who recognized his or her need for Christ early in life. Make the point that in both cases, the person was spiritually dead. Suggest that while it may seem that the first is more dramatic, the second may actually be a bigger miracle, since it can be hard to convince someone who is “good” or “moral” that they are in need of a Savior.

• To aid in memorizing Ephesians 2:8-10, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill on page 35 of the PSG.

• To enhance understanding of Ephesians 2:10, enlist testimonies from people who are involved in a ministry for which they feel they were uniquely gifted.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Guide the group to complete the second question set under In My Context on page 36 of the PSG: As a group, discuss how your Bible study group carries out its purpose based on new life in Christ. What is the purpose of your group and how does that purpose reflect insights found in Ephesians 2? Record insights.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

As group members are reading the plan of salvation, play the song “Only Grace,” by Matthew West, or “Amazing Grace (My Chains are Gone),” by Chris Tomlin. As the song concludes, pray your group will more deeply understand the meaning of grace this week.
Reconciled

God reconciles us to Himself in Christ, removing barriers of hostility between believers.

Ephesians 2:11-22

Memory Verse: Ephesians 2:14

Read Ephesians 2:11-22, First Thoughts (p. 44), and Understand the Context (p. 44).

Study Ephesians 2:11-22, using Explore the Text (pp. 45–49). As you study, take note of the different ways Paul described the reconciliatory work of Jesus in believers’ lives. For further insight, consult the Explore the Bible Adult Commentary (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).

Plan the group time, keeping in mind this session’s main idea that God reconciles us to Himself in Christ, removing barriers of hostility between believers. Tailor the plans for your group using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 50–51), More Ideas (p. 52), and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible.

Grow with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).

Gather the following items: □ Personal Study Guides; □ Two current newspapers; □ Two pairs of scissors; and □ For More Ideas (p. 52): □ Objects (or pictures of objects) that polarize people. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: □ Pack Item 1 (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys); and □ Pack Item 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus). Make copies for group members of: □ Pack Item 12 (Handout: Unity in the New Testament).
FIRST THOUGHTS

Divisions often run deep. Past injustices, current fears, and future imagined responses can contribute to the complexity of tensions. Adding to the complexity, people can be united on one front yet divided on another. Sports teams, shared work goals, and community events may bring diverse groups together yet not remove the divisions that exist away from that event or action. True reconciliation and unity are found in a shared belief in Christ.

(In PSG, p. 37) **What are some of the biggest walls you have seen that separate people? What are some of the underlying issues that cause divisions between people and groups?**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

**EPHESIANS 2:11-22**

Ephesus was a multi-cultural city. Located on a major highway near a seaport, it was a melting pot for many different cultures and religions. One might expect openness and diversity in such a setting. But one group certainly maintained its own cultural identity. The Jews in Ephesus worked hard to maintain the purity of their race and religion.

The separateness of the Jews from other parts of Ephesian culture is best seen in Paul’s visit to Ephesus recorded in Acts 19. As was his custom, Paul began preaching in the synagogue when he arrived in the city (Acts 19:8). The opposition to Paul’s preaching of Jesus was so great that he had to withdraw from the synagogue to preach in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (19:9). Despite many miracles that God performed in Ephesus, the Jews continued to resist the preaching of Christ and even attempted to do miracles in their own power (19:11-20). Though some converted to Christ through these events, many Jews remained hardened in their opposition to the Christian faith.

Many Gentiles also opposed Christianity. The conversion of Gentiles to Christ cut into the profit of those making idols in the worship of Artemis (19:21-27). Even though the climate of Ephesus was open to many religions, the one religion they would not tolerate was Christianity because it required them to give up their idols. Those profiting from that industry stirred up the people against Paul, causing a riot.

The gospel’s message is the one and only way of salvation through Christ. This is not always a popular message, and we can be sure culture will strongly oppose biblical truth. However, Christians should not be the ones to build walls between themselves and the people they are called to reach. They must stand for biblical truth, but standing for truth doesn’t require walling oneself off from the world.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

BROUGHT NEAR (EPH. 2:11-13)

VERSE 11
Salvation is not only an individual work in the lives of people as described in the first part of Ephesians 2. It also involves the creation of a new community of people, not divided by race but united by faith in Christ. Paul began this affirmation by reminding the Ephesians they were once Gentiles in the flesh. This was a reference to the fact they were uncircumcised. The Jewish historian Josephus spoke of Gentiles who laughed at the circumcision of the Jews and ridiculed them for the practice. Yet the Jews continued the practice because they knew it was given by God to Abraham (Gen. 17:2,10-14) and served as their identity as the people of God. Surprisingly, Paul criticized the practice as a form of idolatry. He said that it was done in the flesh by human hands. The Greek word used here was used in the Greek Old Testament in connection to the making of idols (Lev. 26:1,30; Isa. 2:18; 10:11; 19:1; Dan. 5:4,23).

For the Jews, circumcision had become yet another idol that stood in the way of the true worship of God. It was a fleshly attempt to make a connection with God that could only be established by faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:1-10). Using circumcision, the Jews, here referred to as the circumcised, divided themselves from the Gentiles. Such walls were not based upon biblical truth but upon a superiority of the flesh. This caused great division among the people that Paul was called to reach—both Jew and Gentile.

VERSE 12
Paul described four conditions of the Gentiles before they were brought to faith in Christ. First, he said they were without Christ. As non-Jews, Gentiles were cut off from the expectation of the Messiah. They had no expectation of a future Messiah to deliver them from sin and self.

A second condition of the Gentiles was that they were excluded from the citizenship of Israel. Gentiles were well aware of the advantages of Roman citizenship, but they did not know the benefits of being connected to God’s covenant people of Israel. Because of their birth, they were cut off from the people of God. In Romans 9:3-5, Paul enumerated some of the blessings and advantages of the Jews. The Gentiles did not share these advantages.

A third condition of the Gentiles was that they were foreigners to the covenants of promise. Note the plural word covenants. God had made covenants with people like Abraham (Gen. 15:7-21), Isaac (Gen. 26:2-5), Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15), and David (2 Sam. 7). Because the Gentiles were not part of these covenants, they did not share the Jewish hope for the Messiah.

A final condition mentioned by Paul for the Gentiles was that they were without hope and without God in the world. Because the Gentiles did not know the promises of God, they opted to live life in idolatry and to suppress the truth God had revealed to them in creation (Rom. 1:18-23). Paul did not list these conditions to depress the Gentiles but to cause them to marvel at the grace of God in bringing them to Christ.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Foreigners and Strangers in Roman Culture” and “InSites: The Temple and the Church at Ephesus” in the Fall 2019 issue of Biblical Illustrator. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

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Session 4: Reconciled 45

VERSES 11-12
11 So then, remember that at one time you were Gentiles in the flesh—called “the uncircumcised” by those called “the circumcised,” which is done in the flesh by human hands.
12 At that time you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world.
Why do some Christians lose the wonder of God’s salvation at work in their lives? How can that be prevented?

VERSE 13

Having explained the dire predicament of the Gentiles outside of Christ, Paul switched the dialogue with the words *but now*. The Gentiles were no longer without hope and without God. They were now *in Christ Jesus*. How was this accomplished?

The Gentiles were described as once *far away*. This was probably influenced by Isaiah 57:19, “The LORD says, ‘Peace, peace to the one who is far or near, and I will heal him.” God’s peace was available to those who were *near*, a reference to the Jews, but it was also available to those who were *far away*, the Gentiles. Because Christ came, salvation is available to all. But what force is powerful enough to bring the Jews and Gentiles together?

Paul attributed the creation of this new community to the *blood of Christ*. The new community was birthed through an event—Jesus’ death on the cross, where He died to bring together one new humanity. The atoning blood of Christ, shed willingly on the cross, not only forgave the sins of those who trusted in Him, but it brought together two diverse groups—Jew and Gentile—into one new community of faith.

**PEACE DECLARED** *(EPH. 2:14-18)*

**VERSES 14-15**

*For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In his flesh,* 15 *he made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations, so that he might create in himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace.*

What are some areas where your church has struggled to tear down walls of division between Christians?
In order for the division between Jews and Gentiles to be broken, Jesus *made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations*. The word used for *made of no effect* can also be translated “to make ineffective” or “to render powerless.” The Jews made observance of the law a prerequisite for salvation. The problem was that all people are lawbreakers. No person could keep the law in its entirety. Through His blood, Jesus satisfied the righteous requirements of the law and in doing so brought together those who strove to keep the law (Jews) and those who were ignorant of it (Gentiles). Jesus rendered the law of no effect because whether one tried to keep it or didn’t even know about it, the only hope of meeting its requirements was in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ sacrificial death created *one new man from the two*. No longer were they Jews versus Gentiles. They were one in Christ, bringing *peace*.

**VERSE 16**

Christ’s creation of a new humanity did not merely improve race relations. Rather, He went to the cross to *reconcile both to God in one body*. The idea of reconciliation was to bring together two parties who were hostile to one another. Both Jews and Gentiles needed reconciliation with God. Their sin had aroused God’s wrath and created hostility between them. Reconciliation to God *put the hostility to death*. A far greater divide exists between sinful man and holy God than any other hostility among humanity. Yet God bridged that gap through Christ. If God could bridge that gap, couldn’t He also bring diverse people into one new humanity? No human division should be viewed as impossible for reconciliation since God, through Jesus, overcame the greatest hostility of all.

**How does your salvation experience give you hope that human relationships can also be mended?**

**VERSES 17-18**

Again the language of Paul provides a clear reference to Isaiah 57:19, where the *far away* and *near* language is also found. However, Paul’s language also reminds us of Isaiah 52:7, where it says, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the herald, who proclaims peace, who brings news of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” Jesus came and *proclaimed the good news of peace* to both Jews and Gentiles, and they heard this gospel. Those who believed the gospel were brought together into one new humanity. No longer did the divisions between Jews and Gentiles separate them in worship. Now they both had the opportunity to worship God together. Now all those who proclaim this gospel are forwarding the message of peace to those in need of reconciliation with God and with each other.

**VERSE 16**

16 He did this so that he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by which he put the hostility to death.

**VERSES 17-18**

17 He came and proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.
The result of the death of Jesus was that through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father. Under Judaism, all did not have equal access to the Father. The Lord’s presence was associated with the holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant resided. Jews were able to come to the threshold of the building containing this room. However, a wall separated the Jews from the Gentiles. The Gentiles could go no farther than the court of the Gentiles. Not mentioned in this passage but relevant to its discussion was the court of women, beyond which Israelite women were not welcomed to pass. So Jewish worship was a divided affair, with Gentiles and women not receiving the same access as Jewish males. In Christ, that access is now opened to all. Now Jews and Gentiles, men and women, can come to the Father. Paul said this was all accomplished through him, meaning through the death of Jesus.

**CITIZENSHIP GRANTED (EPH. 2:19-22)**

19 So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

VERSES 19-20

Paul had presented a dire picture of Gentiles outside of faith in Christ (Eph. 2:12). But having gained access to God through Jesus, their picture was reversed in Ephesians 2:19-22. They went from being foreigners and strangers to citizens of God’s kingdom. The first term applied to those who lived outside of the land of Israel, and the second term referred to Gentiles who would come and live in the land of Israel. Either way, they still were not citizens of Israel. But through the power of the cross these foreigners were now called fellow citizens with the saints. The Gentiles were no longer foreigners or second-class citizens in God’s kingdom. Rather, they were citizens with all the rights and responsibilities associated with it. However, the bond went even deeper than citizenship. Paul called the Gentile Christians members of God’s household. God’s people are not merely a kingdom but also a family. In Galatians Paul spoke of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). Here he called the new community of Christians God’s household. Those who trust in God’s provision through Jesus Christ become part of His family. Believers are adopted into the family of God, and when that happens, they find that they have many new brothers and sisters as part of their family.

How do the images of God’s kingdom and family promote unity within in the church?

God’s household was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. These two offices in the early church were connected, as seen by their inclusion in Ephesians 4:11 as ministry gifts given to those who were serving the church. The apostles included the twelve disciples, but probably also included others, like Barnabas, who were establishing local churches in
new locales (Acts 14:14). Prophets were those who had been called to edify and build up the church (1 Cor. 14:4). As these gifted persons preached the gospel, they centered on Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. This was an architectural reference that described either the capstone or foundational stone that held the whole structure together. As prophets and apostles preached Jesus, God was building a new humanity.

Why is it important for those who preach or teach to put Jesus at the center of their message?

The hearts of believers serve as the most important place of worship now for the new community of faith.

VERSES 21-22
The Jewish people often spoke of God as abiding on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. But under the new covenant, God was building a holy temple among His church. The word used of temple does not refer to the entire temple complex but the inner portion containing the holy place and the holy of holies. The idea was that God would not dwell in a temple made with human hands but would dwell among His people. The whole building would include both Jews and Gentiles who would come together to form a new temple of the Lord. The hearts of believers serve as the most important place of worship now for the new community of faith.

This new community is being built together for God’s dwelling. The word dwelling was based on the Greek word for home. Paul believed God is now making His home in the lives of those who profess faith in Christ. This happens in the Spirit. As believers put their faith in Christ, they are sealed with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14). The Holy Spirit takes up residence in the hearts of those who trust Christ. God now makes Himself at home in the life of the believer. As Christians unite together with the same faith, God makes His dwelling there. Instead of a provincial temple, where only the Jews were welcomed into the inner portion, God longs for all people—Jew and Gentile—to enter beyond the dividing wall that once separated them. He wants all His children in His presence.

VERSES 21-22
21 In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.
22 In him you are also being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit.
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

WELCOME: As people gather, place them into two teams based on where they are sitting. Give each team a newspaper and a pair of scissors. Instruct one team to cut out headlines that highlight a lack of peace in the world, while the second group cuts out headlines that point to examples of peace. After most have arrived, invite volunteers to share with everyone what they discovered through this exercise.

EXPLAIN: Today we will be reminded that Jesus brings peace. The newspaper headlines reveal that peace can be hard to come by in our world, but one place that peace should always be evident is among believers. God reconciles us to Himself in Christ, removing barriers of hostility between believers.

REVIEW: Discuss key points from Understand the Context in the PSG (p. 38). Direct the group to Pack Item 1 (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys) and Pack Item 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus) to remind them of the location and context for this letter.

TRANSITION: As we explore today’s text, pay attention to the metaphors used by Paul.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Ephesians 2:11-13, while the group underlines descriptions of the Gentiles apart from Christ and circles descriptions of the Gentiles in Christ.

EXPLAIN: Many Jews in Paul’s day, most notably the religious leaders like the Pharisees, placed a greater emphasis on their rules and ceremonies than they did on belief in Jesus. They failed to see that sin, not race or heritage, was what ultimately separated a person from God. Paul reminded readers that apart from Christ, both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) are without hope and separated from God. But in the same way, in Christ both Jews and Gentiles find redemption from sin and reconciliation to God.

HIGHLIGHT: On a board or large sheet of paper, lead the group to list the identifying traits of the Gentiles’ pre-conversion condition (v. 12). Then call on a volunteer to read the first paragraph on page 40 of the PSG.

ASK: How does a lack of intimacy with God fuel division and prejudice among people? How are divisions an indicator of our need for a Savior? (PSG, p. 40)

DISCUSS: Next to the list from verse 12, lead the group to create a second list of the Gentiles’ post-conversion condition (v. 13). Discuss the change brought about by Christ. Ask: What changed in Christ? Why was this such good news for the Gentiles?

STATE: Clarify from the PSG (p. 40): Paul explained to the Ephesians that they were “now in Christ Jesus.” This key phrase denoted their union with Him, whereas previously they were dominated by their sinful nature. They had been “brought near” through Christ’s death on the cross for their sins.

TRANSITION: After establishing that Gentiles can be reconciled to God and united with Jews through the death of Christ, Paul declared that Christ alone brings reconciliation and peace to all people.
READ: Encourage the group to read Ephesians 2:14-18 silently, highlighting the metaphors Paul used to describe Jesus’ work of reconciliation.

MINI-LECTURE: Present a mini-lecture on verses 14-18, reviewing the key points from the PSG (pp. 41–42). Using various metaphors and illustrations (wall, body, etc.), Paul described Jesus as our peace, the one who breaks down all the divisions sin creates among people. Because of the cross, people are united in Jesus and can love and serve Him together. A unified body of believers is especially important when we think about our calling to reflect the love and peace of Jesus to the world.

DISCUSS: How does a common sinfulness lead to division while a common faith in Christ lead to unity? (PSG, p. 42) Explain how you have experienced this firsthand.

SHARE: Read aloud the following statement from the PSG (p. 42): Access to God the Father is given to all who believe through the Holy Spirit. Paul used a word for access that denoted a person in a royal court who escorted a visitor into the king’s presence. Ask: How does this description help you better understand Jesus’ work of reconciliation?

TRANSITION: Having described the what and how of Jesus’ reconciliation, Paul closed this section of his Letter to the Ephesians with a resounding “why.”

READ: Read aloud Ephesians 2:19-22, and encourage the group to listen for the goal of Jesus’ reconciliatory work.

DIRECT: Read the Key Doctrine (The Church) in the PSG (p. 44). Explain that when believers are unified with one another, they show the world a glimpse of the eternal kingdom of God.

GUIDE: Distribute Pack Item 12 (Handout: Unity in the New Testament). Enlist volunteers to read some of the passages included on the handout. Ask: How do these verses help you better understand why unity in the body of Christ is so important to God?

DISCUSS: How does a shared citizenship in God’s family impact how believers view one another? (PSG, p. 44) Is there anything anyone shared in today’s discussion that has changed how you have previously answered that question?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Draw attention to and discuss the bulleted points under In My Context (PSG, p. 45). Review the metaphors Paul used in today’s passages. Ask: How do these metaphors describe the actions of Christ in fulfilling God’s purpose of reconciliation? (PSG, p. 38)

CHALLENGE: Discuss together the first question set on page 45 of the PSG: What could your small group do to promote unity and reconciliation between believers in your community or city? Come up with at least one actionable thing you will do before the end of this quarter.

PRAY: Close in prayer by thanking God for bringing peace to our relationships with Him and with others. Pray that your group would be a clear reflection of unity in Christ to the rest of your church, and ask God to break down any walls of hostility in your church community.
PRACTICE

- Spend time in prayer for the people in your group. Pray that they would be united in Christ and with other believers in their lives. Ask God to reveal to them any areas where sin is creating disunity.

- Take time to reflect on the following question set from In My Context (PSG, p. 45) as it relates to leading your group: Do you know someone who needs to know he or she has a place in God’s household as a result of faith in Jesus? How can you help this believer find his or her place and be welcomed? Identify someone who appears to be an outsider from your social circle and invite him or her to be a part of one of your gatherings.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

For an alternate Focus Attention activity, show the group some objects (or pictures of objects) that polarize people (examples: beans/no beans, a cat/a dog, salty/sweet, winter/summer). Explain: The way people respond passionately and differently to those objects shows us that people will divide over anything. Ask: What are some of the underlying issues that cause divisions between people and groups? (PSG, p. 37) Transition by saying: Today, we will learn that unity matters to God, and that He went to great lengths to unify people to Himself and to one another.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To aid in the discussion of Ephesians 2:11-13, read the following statement from the PSG (p. 40): Oneness in Christ—a key component of the gospel message—is a defined reality. God calls believers to work toward what is already true in heaven. Divide up into small teams and discuss the following question from the PSG (p. 40): As a believer in Christ, what actions might one take to begin to break down the walls of prejudice in our world today?

- For further study of Ephesians 2:14-18, consider the example of peace and unity that Jesus gave us through His earthly ministry. Think about the various relationships He had and the healings He performed. Ask: How do we see Jesus bringing peace among people in the Gospels? Lead the group to share some specific examples that come to mind.

- To help the group better understand the imagery of Jesus as the cornerstone for God’s household (Eph. 2:20-21), lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity in the PSG (p. 43).

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Allow time for the group to reflect silently on the second question set on page 45 of the PSG: Examine your life for things you depend upon for peace other than faith in Christ. Thank God for giving you peace and commit afresh to trust in Him more completely.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Play the song “In You,” by Dave Hunt, from the album Love Abounds. Remind your group that reconciliation with others cannot happen until our hearts are reconciled to God.
Revealed
God invites believers to proclaim the revealed mystery of the church.

Ephesians 3:1-13
Memory Verse: Ephesians 3:6

Read
Ephesians 3:1-13, First Thoughts (p. 54), and Understand the Context (pp. 54–55). As you read, highlight the various times Paul used the word mystery. Go back and reread Ephesians 1:9 for Paul’s first use of the term mystery, which he referenced in Ephesians 3:3-4.

Study
Ephesians 3:1-13, using Explore the Text on pages 55–59. Consider the impact of being named a coheir. For more study helps, consult the Explore the Bible Commentary, found in both print and digital format at LifeWay.com.

Plan
Group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 60–61), More Ideas (p. 62), and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Add variety to your plans for your group in this session by using at least one idea from More Ideas. Consider how to implement the Suggested Music Idea (p. 62).

Gain
Insights from the weekly podcast on Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/ExploreTheBible).

Gather
the following items: ☐ Personal Study Guides; ☐ Volunteers to share about evangelism or missions experiences they’ve had; and for More Ideas (p. 62): ☐ A volunteer to research preaching and proclamation in a Bible dictionary. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: ☐ Pack Item 2 (Outline of Ephesians); and ☐ Pack Item 4 (Poster: Ephesians 2: Old and New). Make copies of: ☐ Pack Item 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark); and ☐ Pack Item 9 (Handout: Mystery in the New Testament).
FIRST THOUGHTS

Many of us love a good mystery. Some stories touted as a mystery are not really mysteries but rather entertaining stories with hints along the way. The story is interesting, but the mystery was never shrouded in doubt. Yet other stories designated as mysteries take us on twists and turns that we are unable to solve until it is revealed in the end. What keeps us engaged is the lack of any hints. In Ephesians 3, Paul revealed a mystery hidden but made known.

(In PSG, p. 46) **What are some of your favorite mystery stories or shows? What makes that story or show interesting to you?**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

**EPHESIANS 3:1-13**

Paul knew how to connect with his audience. Rather than avoiding the culture in which he lived, he used it to explain the gospel without compromising the message. With that in mind, it is not surprising that Paul used the word mystery to describe the content of the gospel.

The term mystery was used to describe religions prevalent among the Gentiles in Paul's day. These mystery religions conducted secret ceremonies of initiation that incorporated worshipers into their sect. Even the cult of the Ephesian god Artemis (Diana) that flourished in Ephesus included these rituals of initiation. Those in the mystery religion would hide their rituals from those outside of the religion. As a person pledged to join, he would participate in secret rituals revealed to the initiate. Many of the Gentiles longed to join the Ephesian sect of Artemis because of its popularity in the region, so using language they would understand, Paul explained that the great mystery has already been revealed by God.

Those who gave their allegiance to Artemis and learned the mysteries that she held believed they would become beneficiaries of her benevolence. She was the daughter of Zeus and as a fertility goddess was thought to hold power over nature. Her worshipers called her queen of heaven, lord, and savior. As the daughter of Zeus, she had authority over heaven, earth, and the underworld. This gave her power over the spirits that many Gentiles feared. If people knew the mysteries, then they believed they could break the chains of fate and defeat. They would have victory over all kinds of spirits attempting to bring injury, sickness, and plague.

In this week’s Scripture passage, Paul declared that he had not received the mystery by joining the cult of Artemis but by revelation from God. He further stated that this mystery had been known all along but was kept

**KEY DOCTRINE**

*Evangelism and Missions*

Missionary effort on the part of all rests thus upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life, and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ (John 20:21).

**BIBLE SKILL**

*Study a word to gain deeper insight.*

Focus on the word “access” in Ephesians 3:12. Look up the word in an English dictionary to discover its basic meaning. Think of modern-day situations where a person needs access to gain entry to something. Use a Bible concordance to find other places that this word is used. Scan the passages, looking for how the word is used in each instance. How would you describe the access provided to the Father through believing in Jesus?
until the appropriate time to reveal that the Gentiles could be joint heirs with the Jews. This all occurred not because Paul was some important person but because God was a God of grace. Apparently, many of the Gentiles listened to Paul’s teaching because many of them came to faith in Christ through his preaching ministry in Ephesus.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE MYSTERY (EPH. 3:1-6)

VERSES 1-2
In verse 1 Paul began a prayer that he did not return to finish until Ephesians 3:14-21. The occasion of that prayer was what had preceded this verse in Ephesians 2:11-22. For this reason would have included his thoughts that Jews and Gentiles had been brought near through the blood of Jesus Christ. God had abolished the dividing wall between them, and they both had access to God. This resulted in a prayerful spirit in the apostle. But before he returned to the prayer, he remembered his condition. He was a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Paul wrote Ephesians from confinement in prison, and he was there on behalf of you Gentiles. His preaching to the Gentiles had landed him in prison. In spite of his circumstance, he thanked God for using him to reach the Gentiles. He did not see himself as the prisoner of Rome but the prisoner of Christ.

Paul mentioned his mission to the Gentiles in verse 1 then reminded his readers of his calling in the verses that follow. He asked them if they had heard of the administration of God’s grace. The word for administration is equivalent to a stewardship entrusted or a task assigned to someone. In this case it included both for Paul. God had given him the responsibility to take the gospel to the Gentiles, and fulfilling that responsibility was the reason he was in prison. Paul believed God gave this task to him for the Gentiles’ good. He was called by grace to share the message of grace. He did not travel to Ephesus of his own decision or his own desire but for the will of God to take the gospel to the Gentiles there.

VERSES 3-6
Paul used the word mystery to describe the message of the gospel. Many in Ephesus longed to know the mysteries of Artemis which they thought would provide significant benefits to their lives. Paul used their own terminology to let them know that the true mystery of God was made known to him by revelation. Previously, Paul had been a Pharisee who held to the strictest of Jewish separation from the world. When he met Jesus on the Damascus road everything changed. God changed this separatist to a preacher who invited the Gentiles to come to Christ by faith. Paul had briefly written about the mystery (Eph. 1:9; 2:11-22), but before he returned to his prayer in verse 14 he would expound upon it once again in the verses that follow.

VERSES 1-6
1 For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles — 2 you have heard, haven’t you, about the administration of God’s grace that he gave to me for you? 3 The mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have briefly written above. 4 By reading this you are able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ. 5 This was not made known to people in other generations as it is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6 The Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.
Paul believed by reading this the Ephesians would understand his insight into the mystery of Christ. This expression was not a declaration that Christ was some mysterious figure who held the secrets of the mystery. Christ Himself was the mystery. Jesus alone could save the Jews and the Gentiles and bring them together into one new humanity (Eph. 2:11-22). As the Ephesians read the earlier portions of Paul’s letter, he knew they would gain insight into the fact that Christ brought the two groups together.

Previous generations did not know the mystery of Christ’s inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. That is not to say the Old Testament was calloused toward the Gentiles. In Genesis 12:3, God had promised to bless all the nations through Abram’s descendants. In Isaiah 49:6, God promised to make the Jews a “light for the nations.” God’s plan never excluded the Gentiles; He revealed to Paul how He would make the Jews a light to bless other nations. Through the Jews God sent His Son to bring both Jews and Gentiles together in one new humanity. Through the blood of Christ, God would offer forgiveness and hope to all who called upon Jesus. This revelation was made known to the present generation through the holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. They were holy because they were set apart for this proclamation. Paul had referenced these two groups earlier (Eph. 2:20) as those at work announcing the message of Christ.

Paul described the Gentile Christians in three ways. First, they were coheirs. The Jews and Gentiles are both coheirs. One group does not have privilege over the other in the inheritance given to them by God. Second, Paul stated that the Jews and Gentiles were members of the same body. God took two groups who often opposed one another and brought them together into the church, a new body made up of Jews and Gentiles. Finally, Paul referred to the Gentiles as partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. What promise did Paul have in mind? Earlier he had spoken of the Holy Spirit of promise (1:13). Certainly it was amazing that both Jews and Gentiles shared in the gift of the Holy Spirit as equals. This had amazed Peter when Cornelius and other Gentiles received the Holy Spirit the same way the apostles had (Acts 10:47-48). Through the preaching of the gospel, this great mystery was now revealed.

THE PROCLAMATION (EPH. 3:7-9)

VERSE 7
7 I was made a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of his power.

VERSE 7
Paul was forever grateful that God had chosen him for the proclamation of the message of salvation. His recognition of this calling was apparent in verse 7. He stated that he was made a servant of this gospel. This was not something he had chosen on his own or had earned through his extensive education. God had made him to be a servant of the gospel. The word servant described a table waiter who served others. Paul was setting the table for the Gentiles to come to Christ as he preached the gospel. This calling was the gift of God’s grace. Paul was not seeking Jesus but rather to persecute His followers when he journeyed on the Damascus road (Acts 9). He did not come to Christ until Christ came to him. This was God’s grace. In the same way salvation was by God’s grace, Paul saw his calling as a servant of the gospel in those same terms.
Paul described the grace of God in his life as **the working of his power.** The Greek word for *working* is where we get our English word *energy.* It refers to the release of power. The second word, *power,* is where we get our English word *dynamite.* It emphasizes strength and power. Therefore, Paul saw his calling before God as the release of divine power that changed the direction of his life. He went from persecuting the church to building it through the preaching of the gospel. This was not by his choosing but by God’s.

**VERSE 8**
The grace that Paul spoke of in the previous verse was given to him for a reason—**to proclaim to the Gentiles.** He described the content of his proclamation as **the incalculable riches of Christ.** The word *incalculable* was used in Job to describe the works of God that were unexplainable (Job 5:9; 9:10). Just as Job failed to find words to describe God’s ways, neither could Paul find the words to describe the riches he had in Christ.

What amazed Paul was that he saw himself as **the least of all the saints.** This could be a play on his name, which meant “little.” However, more than likely it was a reference to his testimony. Who was he to deserve this salvation, much less the calling to spread the message of salvation? Paul had persecuted Christians and tried to remove them from society, but Christ intervened. Paul would never forget who he was when Christ saved him. Because of that he saw himself as less deserving than others. Thankfully grace is not about what one deserves!

**VERSE 9**
By proclaiming the message of grace to the Gentiles, Paul intended to **shed light** on the **mystery** of God’s grace offered to the Gentiles. The Greek word translated *shed light* usually means to bring light to something that is dark; here it is used in a spiritual sense. As Paul proclaimed the riches of Christ, a light came on in the darkened mind of the Gentiles. They understood that God loved them and could save them from their sin. Paul wanted to shed light **for all.** He wasn’t preaching exclusively to the Gentiles but to all who would listen. It just happened that the Gentiles were usually more receptive to his message.

As stewards of the mystery of grace, Christians can wrongly hold on to the message or rightly invest it by sharing it with others.

The subject that needed enlightenment was **the administration of the mystery.** The use of *administration* again (see v. 2) reminded the Ephesians that the gospel was a stewardship. The **mystery** of how Jews and Gentiles are both gathered into one new body is a message of which all Christians are stewards. As stewards of money, people can hold on to that money or invest it in the lives of others. As stewards of the mystery of grace, Christians can wrongly hold on to the message or rightly invest it by sharing it with others.
This mystery was not something new. It was hidden for ages in God who created all things. The Creator God never intended to provide salvation for the Jews to the exclusion of everyone else. His intention was to build for Himself one new body made up of Jews and Gentiles who would worship the One who created them. Paul lamented to the Romans about those who refused to look at creation and worship the Creator. Instead they chose to worship idols made by their own hands (Rom. 1:18-23). The mystery of God’s love for His creation was hidden for a time, but it was manifested when Christ came to bring that message to light.

(PSG, p. 51) Is sharing the gospel more of a responsibility or a privilege? What is the difference?

THE PURPOSE (EPH. 3:10-13)

VERSE 10

This is so that God’s multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens.

VERSE 11

This is according to his eternal purpose accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Those who speak about the church’s demise and downfall do not comprehend fully the purpose of God.

VERSE 11

The subject of this in verse 11 is not merely the display of God’s glory to the authorities in heaven but the greater topic of making His wisdom known through the church. God’s choosing to make a church out of Jew and Gentile was his eternal purpose. The church is central to the plan...
of God throughout history, and it will be that way until the ages. Those who speak about the church’s demise and downfall do not comprehend fully the purpose of God. Jesus had said that He would build His church (Matt. 16:18). He said that the gates of Hades would not prevail against it.

How can we have such confidence in the church? God accomplished His purposes through the church in Christ Jesus our Lord. Ultimately, our confidence is not in church leaders or its members. Our confidence is in the One who built the church through His own sacrificial death on the cross. The church may face trying times and at times it may look like it will fail, but the truth is that it is part of God’s divine will and His church will endure.

VERSES 12-13
Returning to the subject of access (Eph. 2:18), Paul reminded his readers that they had boldness and confident access to God. They did not have that based on who they were but through faith in Jesus Christ. The word boldness implies freedom of speech before God. As Paul was preparing to return to the prayer he had started in Ephesians 3:1, he reminded the Ephesians that through Jesus the church could come confidently to God in prayer. Christians can pray anytime and anywhere. Faith in Christ makes it possible for people to approach their Father with great confidence.

What are some things that inspire confidence in your prayer life?

God’s purposes in building His church were administered in many ways. One of those ways was through the afflictions that Paul endured. Indeed, the apostle was writing to the Ephesians from prison. He endured much hardship for the gospel, and he was doing this on their behalf. Therefore, he encouraged the Ephesians not to be discouraged over his afflictions. Certainly Paul’s trials were great, but he recognized that God was working through him even in the trials. He wanted the Ephesians to embrace this mentality. The more Paul suffered, the more glory came to the Ephesians. God’s purposes could not be thwarted no matter how much it cost Paul. The Ephesians were led to know Christ more intimately and experience salvation more fully as God used Paul in his chains.
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: As the group arrives, instruct them to add a name to the board to create a list of famous detectives, real or fictional (examples: Sherlock Holmes, Nancy Drew, Allan Pinkerton, the Scooby Doo gang). Review the list once most have arrived. Ask: What appeals to you (or doesn't) about mystery stories?

EXPLAIN: Point to Pack Item 2 (Outline of Ephesians) to highlight that today’s study is on Ephesians 3:1-13 “Mystery Revealed.” Say: However, Paul didn’t use the word in the same way we think of the word “mystery” today—as a problem or puzzle to be solved. Let’s focus on God’s Word and see what Paul meant by “the mystery of Christ.”

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: While a volunteer reads aloud Ephesians 3:1-6, direct the group to listen for what Paul wrote about the Gentiles.

ASK: How did Paul seem to feel about the Gentiles? What was his obligation to them? What words did he use to describe them?

HIGHLIGHT: Distribute copies of Pack Item 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark) to anyone who does not yet have one, and point out that verse 6 is this session’s memory verse. Read the verse aloud in unison.

ASK: Why do we have to be reminded so often that people who are not like us can still be part of our Christian family? From the PSG (p. 50): How does the gospel demonstrate that all people can find a place in Christ’s church?

GUIDE: Based on verse 6, what is the mystery? Direct attention to Pack Item 9 (Handout: Mystery in the New Testament). Direct a volunteer to read aloud the handout to further explain the meaning of “the mystery of Christ” (v. 4). Call for responses to what was read.

TRANSITION: When we figure out a mystery, we can’t wait to share the answer with other people. If someone hasn’t seen a movie or finished a book that we have, it’s a real temptation to give away the ending. Think about that excitement as we read the next section of Scripture.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 3:7-9. Direct the group to listen for what, specifically, Paul was proclaiming to the Gentiles.

ASK: How did Paul see his role in the gospel? Do you think he was reluctant or unwilling to take that role? Why or why not? Call for group members to share their first responses to the question in the PSG on page 51: Is sharing the gospel more of a responsibility or a privilege?

MINI-LECTURE: It may be startling to read Paul’s description of himself in verse 8. Many consider Paul as the most important figure in the New Testament other than Jesus. But this wasn’t false modesty on Paul’s part. It wasn’t simply because of his past as a persecutor of the church (Acts 8:1-3), but also because of his perspective on the greatness of knowing Christ (Phil. 3:7-9). Paul saw himself as “not worthy to be called an apostle” (1 Cor. 15:9) and “the worst” of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). He understood that everything he was happened by God’s grace (1 Cor. 15:10).
HIGHLIGHT: Point to Pack Item 4 (Poster: Ephesians 2: Old and New) displayed in the room. Stress that like Paul, every person who comes to faith in Christ is transformed to a new person.

CLARIFY: Use the information under Verses 7-9 in the PSG (p. 50) to clarify the difference between preaching and proclamation. Emphasize that God doesn’t call everyone to be a preacher, but He does call everyone to be a witness.

DISCUSS: What’s the difference between proclaiming the gospel and shedding light on the gospel? Suggest that the first is a verbal witness, while the second is a living witness.

SAY: When we shed light on something, we’re revealing what’s already there. We do that with the gospel when we live with integrity and compassion. Sometimes this gives credibility to the message we’ve already proclaimed, and sometimes it opens the door for us to proclaim the message. Both are necessary.

TRANSITION: While the fact that we’re commanded to proclaim the gospel ought to be enough, it’s helpful that Paul clarified the purpose for the proclamation as well.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 3:10-13, and instruct the group to listen for who receives the proclamation, the purpose of the proclamation, and the result of the proclamation. Lead the group to circle each of these in their Personal Study Guides.

ASK: Can you have boldness even when you don’t feel bold? Explain. Why do you think Paul reminded his readers about his afflictions at this point? Since God’s purposes include using believers to share the gospel with all people, what roadblocks get in the way of believers fulfilling that purpose? How does Paul’s words address any of those potential roadblocks? (PSG, p. 52)

SHARE: Emphasize the Key Doctrine for this study (Evangelism and Missions) (p. 53, PSG). Call for volunteers to share an experience with roadblocks to evangelism or about a time on mission when God worked miraculously.

DISCUSS: What is the relationship between circumstances and a willingness to share the gospel? How can difficulties open the door for sharing the gospel? (PSG, p. 53)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DISCUSS: Guide a discussion of the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 54). Encourage the group to modify or add to the statements.

CHALLENGE: Call attention to the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 54): What natural gifts and abilities do you possess that God could use to share a gospel witness through you? How can you use these gifts or abilities to share Jesus with one person this week?

PRAY: Lead in prayer, asking God to help the group boldly proclaim the mystery of the gospel to people this week.
PRACTICE

• Immediately after the session, text or email the group, thanking them for their participation during the Bible study group time.

• Contact group members who weren’t present. Remind them they can keep up with the group by using their Personal Study Guides. Invite them to share prayer requests, asking for permission to share the requests with others in the group.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Prior to the group time, search the Internet for “mystery riddles.” To replace the Focus Attention activity, read a couple of mystery riddles for the group to solve. Continue with the discussion as written.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

• To supplement the discussion of Ephesians 3:1-6, summarize the information in Understand the Context (PSG, p. 47). Paul seemed like he was about to say something in verse 1, but then he interrupted himself and didn’t get back to the thought until verse 14. He ended chapter 2 with an analogy of the church as members of God’s household (2:19-21), and emphasized in 3:1-6 that Gentiles are part of that household as well. Help group members see the connection between the end of Ephesians 2 and the point of this section, especially verse 6.

• To enhance study of Ephesians 3:7-8, pre-enlist a volunteer to research preaching and proclamation in a Bible dictionary. Allow time for them to present their findings.

• To enhance your understanding of Ephesians 3:10, print a picture of a multi-faceted gemstone. Discuss how the facets help capture and focus the light. Compare the mystery that’s revealed in verse 9 to the gemstone.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Discuss the statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 54) to present a summary of the study. Then lead the group through the first question: As a group, list potential events or activities your small group could host that might offer opportunities for gospel conversations with lost people. What steps does the group need to take to plan one such event or activity?

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Before closing in prayer, play the song “We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations,” by H. Ernest Nichol, or “The Perfect Wisdom of Our God,” by Keith and Kristyn Getty.
Residence

God offers believers strength by Christ dwelling in us.

**EPHESIANS 3:14-21**

**MEMORY VERSE: EPHESIANS 3:17**

**READ** Ephesians 3:14-21, First Thoughts (p. 64), and Understand the Context (p. 64).

**STUDY** Ephesians 3:14-21, using Explore the Text on pages 65–69. As you study, reflect on the great gift God has given His children through the indwelling presence of Christ in us. For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).

**PLAN** the group time, working toward the goal of helping your group understand that they are to pray for the spiritual growth of others, are changed from the inside out by the indwelling Christ, and are to honor God for demonstrating His majesty. Tailor the plans for your group using Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 70–71), More Ideas (p. 72), and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible.

**GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).

**GATHER** the following items: □ Personal Study Guides; □ A pre-enrolled volunteer to present a mini-lecture on the commentary for Ephesians 3:16-19; and □ Pieces of scrap paper (at least one per person). Prepare to display the following Pack Items: □ **PACK ITEM 1** *(Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys)*; and □ **PACK ITEM 3** *(Poster: The City of Ephesus)*. Make copies of: □ **PACK ITEM 13** *(Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians).*
**FIRST THOUGHTS**

Sometimes, the simple presence of a friend makes all the difference. Most of us appreciate someone by our side when receiving serious medical test results or attending a legal proceeding for a family member. Strength to do the hard things in life can be found simply through a physical presence. “I’ll go with you, and we’ll face this together” may be some of the most precious words we ever hear.

(In PSG, p. 55) Recall a time when the physical presence of a friend helped you get through a challenging situation.

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**UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT**

**EPHESIANS 3:14-21**

Ephesians 2:11–3:13 focused on the glorious truth that, through His cross, Jesus created a new multi-cultural community of faith comprised of Jews and Gentiles. Based on that new reality, Paul offered a prayer for the Ephesian believers.

The apostle prayed to the Father to strengthen the Ephesian church. Paul’s prayers, as inspired Scripture, represent more than a model for how we should pray. They also reveal God’s plan for every church and every believer and, in this case, give a description of the new life brought into existence through Jesus Christ. This prayer represents clearly what it means to be made alive with Christ (Eph. 2:5). Paul’s prayer requests on behalf of the Ephesians point to the indwelling of Christ in the life of the believer. The presence of Christ changes everything. With Him, a new life emerges for His glory.

Paul’s prayer in 3:14-21 serves as a bridge in the letter from the theological explanation of salvation and the blessings brought with it (chaps. 1–3) to the practical applications that this theology has in the daily lives of believers (chaps. 4–6). This is a pattern in Paul’s writings, not just in Ephesians but in other New Testament letters as well. At the beginning of Ephesians 4, there is the all-important conjunction “therefore” that marks the transition from doctrine to practice. This reminds us of that which distinguishes Christian faith from all other religions. It is God-centered, not sourced in what human beings can do to merit salvation. The lifestyle of a follower of Jesus is a reverent response to what God has already graciously done, not an attempt to reach God through human effort and right behavior.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

PETITIONED (EPH. 3:14-15)

VERSE 14
Paul began a prayer for the Ephesians in 3:1, when he said, “for this reason.” However, he put that prayer on hold to discuss the great mystery of how God brought the gospel to the Gentiles (vv. 2-11) and to marvel that God had used even his afflictions and trials to advance the gospel to them (vv. 12-13). He picked that prayer up again in verse 14 by repeating the phrase, for this reason. Does this phrase describe Paul’s digression in Ephesians 3:2-13 or does it go with what preceded it in 2:11-22? Some commentators believe that it describes the central idea of the passage in the second chapter—that God has brought near those who were once far, giving them peace with God. Since God brought Jew and Gentile together into one new humanity and gave them access to God, Paul was praying that God would strengthen the believer for participation in that work.

Other commentators believe that the reason for Paul’s prayer was the content of his digression in Ephesians 3:2-13—that God had granted Paul the right to participate in the great mystery of sharing the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. Through his trials, Paul faithfully continued to serve the Lord. The purpose of the prayer in this case would be for the Gentile Christians who have been incorporated into God’s kingdom to experience their spiritual privileges to the fullest measure. The content of chapters 2 and 3 are so similar regarding the incorporation of Jews and Gentiles into the same body that the reason for Paul’s prayer could have been spiritual strength for those coming into the kingdom through Paul’s preaching.

In light of God’s marvelous work in bringing together Jews and Gentiles, Paul decided to kneel in prayer. Standing was the more prominent posture in prayer among the Jews, but kneeling was also part of their experience as well. The act of kneeling represented humility and reverent worship. (See Mark 11:25; Luke 18:11,13.)

For Paul, prayer was not formality or ritualistic incantation. Rather, he prayed before the Father. The preposition before implied a face-to-face or intimate encounter. Following Jesus’ pattern in the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9), Paul addressed his concern to the Father. If both Jew and Gentile had been gathered into the same family, it is significant that Paul addressed his prayer to the Father of both those who are near and those who were once far off from God. In light of the fact that God had brought together one new family, Paul prayed to the Patriarch of that family.

VERSE 15
As Paul began his prayer for strength for all Christians, Jew and Gentile, he acknowledged that God was the Father of every family in heaven and on earth. This could be a reference to all families in the past and present, or it could be a reference to all created beings—earthly and angelic. Either way, the emphasis is on the dominion of God over every created being as well as every social institution. No person or family exists outside of the role

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

VERSE 15
15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.
of God’s dominion. He has authority over the Jews and over the Gentiles. As God brought them into one new family, He continued to have authority over them.

The idea that God named every family is again an emphasis of His sovereignty and dominion. As the Creator who created the powers in heaven and people on earth, God is the One who gave them life and strength. He brought them into existence as they were and placed them in their roles in relationship to His overall purposes of creation. Then He named them.

In the Old Testament, naming something expressed the dominion of one being over another. When God created Adam, He did something important: “he created them male and female. When they were created, He blessed them and called them mankind” (Gen. 5:2). Adam named the animals and had dominion over them: “The man gave names to all the livestock, to the birds of the sky, and to every wild animal” (Gen. 2:20). Isaiah 40:26 illustrated this point: “Look up and see! Who created these? He brings out the stars by number and calls all of them by name. Because of his great power and strength, none of them is missing.”

As Paul addressed his prayer to the Father, he spoke to the One who was not merely the Father of the Jews, but the Father of every family He had created. Surely this God would hear Paul’s petition and strengthen His children.

**What are some of the prayer requests you are bringing to God on behalf of your church?**

**INDWELLED (Eph. 3:16-19)**

**VERSE 16**

I pray that he may grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power in your inner being through his Spirit,
Paul prayed that the Spirit would also strengthen the Ephesians believers in their new faith.

Paul prayed also that God would strengthen them by the Spirit according to the riches of his glory. He had already spoken of these riches in Ephesians 2:4,7. Salvation opens the treasure of God’s riches to the believer, and He has given these riches to us by grace. Paul also had spoken of God’s glory in Ephesians 1:6,17, where he described the greatness of God’s mercy and attributes as Father. God had a storehouse of riches to lavish upon the Ephesians who had turned to Christ, and Paul prayed for God to strengthen them by His Spirit according to those riches.

VERE 17
Paul prayed that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. The emphasis in this verse is the continual presence of Christ’s indwelling after a person believes in Christ. Certainly Jesus takes residence in a person’s heart when he or she trusts Christ for salvation (John 14:23). This is not a question of whether He will abandon those who lack faith after their conversion experience. Rather, Paul was praying that Christ would continue to dwell as the reigning resident of one’s heart.

Having Christ as resident ruler of the heart meant that they would be rooted and firmly established in love. When Christ indwells believers, He grounds their lives in love. Paul used an agricultural and an architectural word to demonstrate the foundation of love in a believer’s life. He prayed that their love would be like a tree that had deep roots in the soil of love. Then he prayed that their love would be like a secure building that rested on a solid foundation. Paul did not pray only for power for believers. Absolute power can corrupt a lesser being than God. Instead, Paul prayed for both power and love. With Christ living inside believers, we have access both to the power of God and the love of God. Paul prayed for strengthening in both of these areas.

The salvation experience is not the end but the beginning of a person’s life with God.

VERSE 18
Having prayed for the believer to be rooted and grounded in the love of God, Paul further described that love in his prayer. Even though Christ indwells a believer at salvation, that Christian always has more to discover of the dimensions of God’s love. The salvation experience is not the end but the beginning of a person’s life with God. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would comprehend all the dimensions of God’s love. He listed four dimensions.

First, Paul prayed that they would understand the length and width, height and depth of God’s love. These were the terms usually associated with any three-dimensional object such as the ark of the covenant (Ex. 37:1-2) or Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 6:2-3). By using these dimensional terms, Paul was indicating that love was something as real as the ark of the covenant or Solomon’s temple. Love is a nebulous term, hard to define
and even harder to embrace. But in Paul’s way of thinking, the love of God was a concrete object that could be known and embraced by those who are indwelt by Christ.

VERSE 19
Having expressed a desire for the Ephesians to comprehend the dimensions of God’s love, Paul reminded them that the fullness of Christ’s love surpasses knowledge. Even those who have experienced Christ’s love in salvation still have more of His love to discover. By praying for them to know that which surpasses knowledge, Paul was praying that they would continue to learn and experience more of Christ’s love as they were growing in their faith through the presence of the indwelling Christ.

To summarize his prayer, Paul prayed that they would be filled with all the fullness of God. The inner strength of the Holy Spirit is a gift that leads to a fuller knowledge of the love of God. Knowledge and experience of God’s love leads to love, and love leads the believer to the fullness of God. Those who love God want to please Him and live the way He desires. As the believer grows and experiences the effects of the indwelling Christ, he should be progressing toward complete maturity in his relationship with God. This is a pursuit that will continue until the believer stands before God (1 John 3:2).

(In PSG, p. 61) How does grasping the depth of Christ’s love bring power to the life of a believer? How does the love of Christ change a person from the inside out?

HONORED (EPH. 3:20-21)

VERSE 20-21
Paul ended his prayer with a word of praise declaring God’s majesty and the demonstration of that majesty in the church and in Christ. Like his prayer, this doxology focused on the matchless power of God. It also serves as a bridge in the letter from the theological explanation of salvation and the blessings brought with it (chaps. 1–3) to the practical applications that this theology has in the daily lives of believers (chaps. 4–6).

Paul began the doxology by giving praise to the one who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us — to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.
The source of this unimaginable activity of God was the power that works in us. The power of the indwelling Spirit mentioned in Paul’s prayer was the same power that could do more than Paul even imagined. As believers yield to the Spirit, God can do a work in them that is better than anyone can imagine.

**God does not do His work in the church for other people to take the credit.**

God does not do His work in the church for other people to take the credit. He did these things for His glory. Though several New Testament doxologies speak of Christ Jesus bringing glory to the Father (Rom. 16:27; Heb. 13:21; 1 Pet. 4:11), this is the only doxology that explicitly refers to the church as the medium of God’s glory. Both Jesus and His church magnify the gracious and loving characteristics of our God. Jesus does so completely, but the church does so as it grows in strength and power through the presence of the indwelling Christ.

How does the church bring glory to God? For starters, it magnifies the grace of God evidenced in the cross (Eph. 1:7). It demonstrates the reality of God’s raising us from death to life (2:1-10). The church also displays how God could take two totally different groups of people, Jews and Gentiles, and form them into one new dwelling for His Spirit (2:14-16). Every time people look at the church, they should be led to glorify God for His amazing work that defies explanation or imagination. Had He only forgiven sin, this would have been enough to cause people to marvel. But He did more. As people look at the church, they should be looking at a living work of art made by God’s hand.

The glory of God in the church and in Jesus Christ is unending. It will be to all generations, forever and ever. The glory of God in Christ and His church is not confined to one generation. It is not part of a cultural movement or period in history. The church is a timeless trophy of God’s redemptive activity through all ages and generations. As the church responds to God’s power, love, and saving grace, it will continue to bring Him glory until time is no more.

Paul’s doxology ended with Amen, a transliteration of the Hebrew word that served as a word of agreement or validity. Paul hoped that all would agree that the church was a marvelous mystery made up of both Jew and Gentile who were not perfect but were forgiven. They were also in the process of being transformed to the fullness of God. As they yielded to the Spirit’s indwelling work in their lives, they were being transformed day by day into a temple that would bring glory to God.

How would you like to see God strengthen the believers in your church? What if He does something better?
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

CHALLENGE: As the group arrives, give each person a piece of scrap paper and instruct them to write down the name of their favorite TV or movie friendship. Once everyone has written something down, collect the pieces of paper. Read them aloud one at a time and try to guess who gave which response. Ask: Why are these relationships so memorable?

EXPLAIN: It’s hard to think of a movie or TV show that doesn’t include a pair of close friends. That’s because camaraderie is woven into our souls by a God who created us for community and interpersonal relationship. The most important relationship we will ever have is our friendship with God, and that is made possible through faith in Jesus.

REVIEW: Discuss key points from Understand the Context on page 56 of the PSG. Direct the group to Pack Item 1 (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys) and Pack Item 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus) to remind them of the location and context for this letter.

TRANSITION: Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians in today’s text helps us better understand the implications of Jesus’ indwelling presence in our daily lives.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: As you read aloud Ephesians 3:14-15, encourage the group to visualize Paul’s posture as he wrote these words.

EXPLAIN: Verse 14 begins with a phrase that links Paul’s words in this section of his letter with his description of the Ephesians in chapter 2—the unified body of Christ. Everything that follows through verse 21 is part of Paul’s prayer for this group of Christians.

INSTRUCT: Distribute copies of Pack Item 13 (Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians). Review the verses in Ephesians that reference the Trinity. Highlight that Ephesians 3:14-19 begins with Paul’s reference to the Father, whom he petitioned in verse 14. Ask: How did Paul describe God the Father in these verses?

SUMMARIZE: Using the information on these verses in the PSG (p. 57), briefly summarize Paul’s description of the Father and the family of God. Propose that Paul wanted his readers to see themselves as intimately connected to one another through their relationship with God.

DISCUSS: Comment that Paul’s prayers reveal much insight into his relationship with God and his love for others. Then ask: How might a person’s prayer requests for others reveal the requester’s understanding of God? How might a person’s understanding of God impact how they pray for the spiritual growth of others? (PSG, p. 57)

TRANSITION: After reminding readers of their identities within God’s family, Paul made his specific petitions to God on behalf of the Ephesians.

READ: Invite one person from the group to read Ephesians 3:16-19, while the others listen for Paul’s four prayers for the Ephesians.
STATE: Call attention to this statement from the PSG (p. 58): Paul “shared with the Ephesians four specific requests of his prayer for them: spiritual strength, abiding faith, awareness of God’s love, and the fullness of God.”

MINI-LECTURE: Invite a pre-enlisted volunteer to present a mini-lecture on the commentary for verses 16-19 (PSG, pp. 58–60). Guide them to pay attention to the main idea behind each of Paul’s four prayer requests.

OBSERVE: Call attention to Pack Item 13 (Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians). Paul began his prayer by kneeling before the Father, one Person of the Trinity. In these verses he mentioned the other two Persons—the Son and the Spirit.

ASK: What is the connection between being strengthened by the Holy Spirit and Christ indwelling a believer? How are they similar? How are they different? (PSG, p. 59)

STATE: Believers are changed from the inside out by the indwelling Christ. Christ’s love within us aids our spiritual growth and helps us persevere in our relationship with Him. Consider Paul’s description of Christ’s love in another of his letters. Read Romans 8:38-39.

ASK: How does grasping the depth of Christ’s love bring power to the life of a believer? How does the love of Christ change a person from the inside out? (PSG, p. 61)

TRANSITION: Following his heartfelt and intentional prayer for the Ephesians, Paul closed by declaring God’s majesty and the demonstration of that majesty in the church and in Christ.

READ: As a group, read Ephesians 3:20-21 aloud.

EXPLAIN: These two verses are often referred to as a doxology, which simply means a short statement or hymn of praise to God. They are the only appropriate endings to a prayer that reflects on the great truth of Jesus’ indwelling power in the lives of His people. These verses also bring the first section of Ephesians to a close as Paul prepared to help his readers apply what he had just taught them.

ASK: In our heads, we know that God is limitless in His power, but that message can be more difficult to apply to our hearts. Briefly discuss this group of questions from the PSG (p. 61): How do people place limits on God in their prayers? What kinds of limits might they place on God? How do these limits compare to the way Paul described God?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

SUMMARIZE: Direct the group to review Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21. Instruct them to summarize in their own words why God is worthy of our honor and praise.

REVIEW: Direct the group to read in unison the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 63). Lead them to answer the first question set: As a group, spend time evaluating the systematic plan your small group has in place to pray specifically for the spiritual growth of one another. What might the group do to strengthen the plan? Invite volunteers to share their responses when finished and record insights on a board.

CLOSE: Before you close in prayer, remind the group that they are changed from the inside out by the indwelling Christ. Call for them to commit to taking an active role in fostering one another’s spiritual growth and connection to Jesus. Use the doxology from Ephesians 3:20-21 as your closing prayer.
PRACTICE

• Spend time praying by name for your group members, focusing your prayers on their spiritual growth and responsiveness to Christ’s indwelling presence.
• Journal your thoughts as you reflect on the following question set from In My Context (PSG, p. 63): To what can you point in your life that indicates you equally value the development of your inner being along with the outward person?

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)
To replace the Focus Attention activity, begin by reading the paragraph on page 55 of the PSG. Invite volunteers to share their responses to the question: Recall a time when the physical presence of a friend helped you get through a challenging situation.

To transition, say: In the same way that we gain strength to face challenging situations by the mere presence of a good friend, Jesus strengthens us to grow in faith and persevere in the struggles of life by being present with us always. Grasping that truth is at the heart of Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians in today’s text.

EXPLORE THE TEXT
• For additional insight into Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-15, draw attention to the Key Doctrine—God the Father (PSG, p. 58). Discuss how this doctrinal statement informs the way we pray.
• To supplement discussion of Ephesians 3:16-19, point out that Paul gave a visual image to aid his readers (v. 18). Guide the group to reflect on this question: What metaphor or mental image would you use to describe God’s love for you? Instruct them to take a few minutes to draw a picture or write a poem that captures their thoughts.
• For further study of the doxology in Ephesians 3:20-21, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity in the PSG (p. 62).

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)
Explain that the mission of the church as a whole and each individual believer is to honor God and glorify Him in all generations on all corners of the earth. Call for quiet reflection on the questions from page 63 of the PSG: How is Christ being glorified “in all generations” through your ministry? What adjustments need to be made to bring honor to God to a greater degree? Challenge the group to discuss these questions with their spouse or a trusted friend this week.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA
Listen to “In Christ Alone (My Hope Is Found),” by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend.
Walking Together

Believers demonstrate the truth of the gospel by being unified in their actions.

EPHESIANS 4:1-10

MEMORY VERSE: EPHESIANS 4:1

READ Ephesians 4:1-10, First Thoughts (p. 74), and Understand the Context (pp. 74–75). As you read, keep track of how often Paul used the word “one.” Consider your response to the question, Why is unity so important to Paul?

STUDY Ephesians 4:1-10 using Explore the Text on pages 75–79. For further insight, review PACK ITEM 12 (Handout: Unity in the New Testament) and PACK ITEM 13 (Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians). For more study helps, consult the Explore the Bible: Adult Commentary, found in both print and digital format at LifeWay.com.

PLAN group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 80–81), More Ideas (p. 82), and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Add variety to your plans for your group in this session by using at least one idea from More Ideas. Consider how to implement the Suggested Music Idea (p. 82).

GAIN insights from the weekly podcast on Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/ExploreTheBible).

GATHER the following items: ☐ Personal Study Guides; ☐ Two prepared index cards (see p. 80 for wording suggestions). Prepare to display the following Pack Item: ☐ PACK ITEM 2 (Outline of Ephesians). Make copies of: ☐ PACK ITEM 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark); ☐ PACK ITEM 12 (Handout: Unity in the New Testament); and ☐ PACK ITEM 13 (Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians).
**FIRST THOUGHTS**

Many churches have adopted recovery ministries to help people in addiction find freedom from substance abuse. In some cases, the focus in those congregations moved from “those people” to “us” as they realized their own need of deliverance. It is interesting how our perspective of others changes when we realize our own dependencies. The sense of solidarity among fellow strugglers cuts across the normal dividing lines of class, ethnicity, and political affiliations.

(In PSG, p. 64) How can a personal struggle or crisis bring us into a relationship with another person with whom we would not have connected under normal circumstances?

**UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT**

**EPHESIANS 4:1-10**

Ephesus was a confluence of many different cultures and religions. Though the predominant god of the city was the goddess Artemis (also known as Diana), this by no means indicated that all people in Ephesus were worshipers of this god. Many other gods and goddesses were worshiped in Ephesus, including Zeus, Apollo, Dionysius, Athena, and Cybele. It is important to keep in mind that the people of Ephesus were polytheistic. They did not believe in exclusivism when it came to their worship. They would merely add more gods to their worship experience. It was out of this context that many came to Christ in Ephesus. How could God bring unity to a group of people that came from so many religious backgrounds?

Other worshipers held to magic or folk beliefs. In Acts 19:13-20, Luke detailed the story of a man named Sceva who tried to add the name of Jesus to his ritual of exorcism, and the demon-possessed man attacked Sceva and his sons. This prompted great fear among those who held to these incantations and folk beliefs. They brought out their religious texts—which were valued at 50,000 pieces of silver—and burned them. How would Paul bring people recently converted from these folk religions to unity in the church?

Jews also dominated the landscape of Ephesus. It is estimated that between ten and twenty thousand Jews lived there. Paul began his mission in Ephesus by speaking for three months in a synagogue (Acts 19:8). However, he experienced tremendous opposition from those Jews and ended up preaching in a lecture hall nearby (Acts 19:9). Some of the recent converts in Ephesus were Jews, so how was Paul supposed to foster unity with the new church?
In the first three chapters of Ephesus, Paul had enumerated the blessings that were theirs in Christ because of God’s gracious offer of salvation. To begin the next half of the letter, he emphasized the unity that was there through the Spirit and His presence in the church. Unity could rise out of diverse backgrounds to bring even more glory to God.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WALKING WORTHY (EPH. 4:1-3)

VERSE 1
In chapter four, Paul transitioned from beliefs about salvation to how salvation practically impacts a person’s life. One of the areas that salvation impacts a person is in his or her relationship with others. A person who has trusted Christ can have unity with others even though they have diverse backgrounds. With the transitional word, therefore, Paul focused his attention on what that unity would look like.

Paul first identified himself as a prisoner in the Lord. He had previously identified himself as a “prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles” (Eph. 3:1), but here he shortened it to the prisoner in the Lord. Like the previous reference, Paul indicated that he was physically imprisoned because he was carrying out the work of the Lord. Though the prison held his body, his spirit was captured by Christ. He was in prison because his passion for telling others about Christ was greater than his desire for personal convenience.

With this passion for fulfilling God’s will, Paul began to urge the Ephesians to take seriously their calling to follow Christ. The word can also be translated “to entreat” or “to exhort” or “to appeal.” Paul, who was already setting this example, appealed to the Ephesian Christians to live worthy of the calling you have received. The word worthy was often used of balancing scales where two sides came to be equal. He wanted their lives to match their professions of faith in Christ. He appealed to them on the basis of their calling. They had not worked for their salvation or achieved it on their own merit; it was a gift of God (Eph. 2:8-10). Therefore, they had a calling upon their lives to live in a way that their words matched their practice.

VERSES 2-3
Paul listed several virtues that would promote unity within the church. These are virtues that Jesus Himself displayed. The first of these virtues is humility. Few things are more destructive to a unified church than the lack of humility, also known as pride and arrogance. Humility is not the denigration of self or false assurances of one’s lack of worth. However, it does mean the willingness to surrender oneself to God and allow Him to serve as the supreme authority of life. Peter encouraged those in the Christian community to clothe themselves with humility (1 Pet. 5:5). It is hard to argue with the humble, and this in itself is a first step toward unity.
Paul also encouraged Ephesian Christians to live with **gentleness.** This implies self-control and a tempered spirit. Christ displayed this characteristic in His dealings with people (Matt. 11:29) and encouraged this quality (translated “meek”) in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:5). Paul also listed this characteristic as a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23).

In addition to humility and gentleness, Paul included **patience** as a characteristic that promoted unity. One of the dangers of living in community with others is that anger can damage relationships through rage, bitterness, slander, or a spirit of vengeance. The key to controlling those powerful emotions in the context of community is patience. The Greek term for **patience** is the combination of a word for anger and a word for long. The word for anger is an explosive kind of anger, and put together these two words might mean to have a long fuse or to be slow to anger.

A final quality in verse 3 that promotes unity is **bearing with one another in love.** Forbearance is the result of patience. This also was a characteristic of Christ (Matt. 17:17). Those who love others are far more willing to endure others’ faults than those who do not love them.

Those who express humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance help foster a spiritual unity within the body of Christ. Therefore, Paul encouraged the Ephesian Christians to be those who were **making every effort** to keep this type of unity. To be patient, gentle, humble, and forbearing does require effort. It doesn’t come naturally. But the results are worth it.

**Unity in the church is impossible without the work of the Holy Spirit.**

Paul referred to this type of unity as the **unity of the Spirit.** The Holy Spirit is the agent of this type of unity. As He produces fruit in the lives of believers, the Spirit creates the characteristics needed for unity in people’s lives (Gal. 5:22-23). Without His work, characteristics of pride, anger, and agitation threaten to dominate relationships. Unity in the church is impossible without the work of the Holy Spirit. This unity of the Spirit occurs **through the bond of peace.** The word bond is used for that which strengthens something else, like the ligaments that hold the body together (Col. 2:19). As people are committed to peace with one another and are operating in the power of the Holy Spirit, they are held together in unity.

**How have you seen the qualities Paul mentioned portrayed in your church recently?**
VERSE 4
Having listed characteristics that promote unity within the church, Paul then turned to common beliefs that promote unity. He proclaimed that there was one body and one Spirit. The church is not a gathering of many different bodies—it is one body. It is a single community made up of Jews and Gentiles who have been reconciled to God through Christ. Though this body meets in many places, speaks different languages, and serves in various cultures, the body of Christ is still one. The church can be unified because in its core nature it is one body. Instead of theology dividing the church into separate members, it actually brings them together under one body.

Paul also proclaimed that the church has one Spirit. Through this Spirit the body of Christ lives and moves (1 Cor. 12:13). The Baptist church doesn’t have one Spirit and the Pentecostal church another Spirit. There is not a Spirit for American Christians and a Spirit for Brazilian Christians. One and the same Holy Spirit fills every person who believes. We can have unity because we have the same presence of God indwelling all of us.

In addition to one body and one Spirit, Christians share one hope at your calling. Before coming to Christ, people are without hope (Eph. 2:12). However, in Christ believers have hope because they have been called to God through Christ (Eph. 1:1:18). The Jews did not share a different hope from the Gentiles. In Christ they had the same hope that was found in their salvation experience. Jesus’ resurrection assured the believers’ resurrection to eternal life. Those who share similar hopes for the future often stand together united based on their common hope. Football players hoping for a championship often stand together in unity to try and achieve the goal. Students working together with hopes of a scholarship often unite their efforts to achieve the goal. So, too, those who share a common hope of eternal life can gather together in unity, knowing the outcome of their calling.

VERSES 5-6
Paul listed three more unifying beliefs in verse 5. First, he acknowledged that believers share one Lord. Though Ephesus had an inclusive religious climate—adding one god upon another—Paul reminded the Ephesians that Christians had one Lord, Jesus Christ. The most basic confession of a Christian was Jesus is Lord, and this could only be claimed through the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). More than a belief, this was a common allegiance shared by all Christians to the person of Jesus Christ. Anyone could give lip-service to this saying, but only those who embraced its calling were truly unified with the body of Christ.

Second, Paul identified one faith. This could have been a reference to the belief needed to embrace Jesus as Lord, or it could have been a reference to the truths about Jesus. Certainly a person is saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9), and without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). However, the word faith sometimes refers to a body of truth (1 Tim. 3:9; 4:1,6; Titus 1:4; Jude 3). Either way leads to the same
conclusion—that Jesus the Lord and object of faith is the One who brings real unity to those who are otherwise different.

Third, Paul spoke of one baptism that bound people together in unity. Some difference of opinion occurs in interpretations of this passage. Some believe that it is referring to water baptism. If that is the case, the meaning would be clear—Christians are baptized into the name of Jesus Christ and no other. Water baptism is a clear confession of faith in Jesus Christ and distinguishes them from all others who have not experienced baptism. Other scholars believe that baptism here is a reference to Spirit baptism that occurs the moment a person believes in Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). All believers share the experience of being baptized in the Spirit, and that is what creates unity within believers. Whether this verse intends water baptism or Spirit baptism, it sees baptism as a unifying factor within the church.

Paul listed one final belief that united everyone in the church. They all shared one God and Father of all. Christians are brothers and sisters who share the same Father. This Father is above all and through all and in all. Nothing in existence would be without the creative activity of God, and He is the Father of all those He adopted into His kingdom. Theology should not divide the church. Properly understood, it should unite the church around its great truths.

Which of the unifying factors Paul mentioned has helped you most in uniting with others?

VERSES 7-8

7 Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. 8 For it says: When he ascended on high, he took the captives captive; he gave gifts to people.

ENJOYING VICTORY (EPH. 4:7-10)

VERSES 7-8

One other factor that unites the church is its giftedness. But who has not seen churches divided over the matter of giftedness? Remember the church at Corinth. Spiritual giftedness does not have to divide a church if one realizes the source of all gifts. Paul stated that grace was given to each one of us. People are saved not because they deserve it or have earned it but because God is a gracious God who took the initiative to give salvation freely to all who believe. This gift was distributed not based on the believer’s merit but according to the measure of Christ’s gift. With the gift of salvation came other gifts of God’s grace that are to be used to build up the body of Christ.

How does the grace of God unify the body of Christ?
Paul used an illustration from a military victory parade in Psalm 68 to introduce the idea of believers receiving gifts. To do so, he summarized the entire psalm here in verse 8. Psalm 68 was a victory hymn written by David to celebrate the conquest of a Jebusite city. It described a victory parade that took the conquerors physically up Mount Zion and figuratively into the presence of the Lord in heaven. This parade found its ultimate expression in Christ, who conquered His enemies and ascended back to His Father’s throne in heaven.

The victory parade described a conqueror who ascended on high and took the captives captive. The application of this passage in relation to Paul’s discussion is that Christ overcame His enemies and took captive for Himself those who were captive to sin. He then gave gifts to those He had taken captive. Unlike conquering warriors like David, Jesus gave tribute to the ones who were once held captive.

VERSES 9-10

Jewish Rabbis interpreted Psalm 68 in light of Moses’ ascent of Mount Sinai to receive the law. Paul applied Psalm 68 to the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Jesus first descended to the lower parts of the earth. This is a reference to His incarnation, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among men (John 1:14). After living a perfect life but dying a sinner’s death, Christ ascended to heaven in victory. This verse is a reminder that Christ came all the way down to earth (Phil. 2:5-8) and ascended all the way back to heaven (Phil. 2:9-11). The victory of the unified church was accomplished not through human means but through the obedience of Jesus to His Father.

Paul made it clear the one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens. Jesus, the incarnated Son of God, came to earth, died on a cross, and was resurrected by the Father. The reference to heavens could have been a nod to the Jewish calculation of seven heavens, or it could have been a way of stating that Jesus ascended to the highest place. Not even death could hold Jesus back from His rightful place in heaven.

Paul ended his use of Psalm 68 and the victory parade analogy by emphasizing the reason for Jesus’ return to the Father. He did so in order to fill all things. As head of the universe (Col. 1:18), Jesus took His place at the throne. However, He did not abandon those on earth as orphans. He told His disciples, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. He is the Spirit of truth. The world is unable to receive him because it doesn’t see him or know him. But you do know him, because he remains with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you” (John 14:16-18). Again Jesus told His disciples, “When the Counselor comes, the one I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me” (John 15:26). Jesus went away to send the Holy Spirit who would fill all believers, uniting them together in Christ.
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: As the group arrives, write the words Group Project in large letters on the board or a sheet of paper. Ask: When you heard those words in a high school or college class, what was your gut reaction? Did they excite you or fill you with dread? Invite the group to share their best and worst experiences with group projects. Discuss: How do you respond to the idea that church is intended to be a group project?

TRANSITION: Using Pack Item 2 (Outline of Ephesians), point out that Ephesians 4 is a turning point in Paul’s letter: For the first three chapters, Paul discussed what the church believes. But in chapter 4, Paul transitioned to talk about what we as believers do, and more importantly, how we do it. As we get into the passage, you’ll hear one word repeated over and over.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: While a volunteer reads aloud Ephesians 4:1-3, direct the group to listen for four key attitudes that should characterize the way believers interact with one another.

ASK: Do any of these attitudes come easy to you? When, or with whom, is it most difficult to display any of these attitudes?

HIGHLIGHT: Distribute copies of Pack Item 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark) to anyone who does not yet have one, and point out this session’s memory verse. Read the verse in unison. Ask: If people do not display these attitudes, are they living unworthy of the calling they have received? Why or why not?

ASK: How do the attitudes and actions identified by Paul in these verses serve as a demonstration of the gospel? How do they help us share Jesus with others? (PSG, p. 67)

GUIDE: In advance, prepare two index cards. On the first, write phrases such as, “Too many people are dying without knowing Christ! We can’t afford to waste time making sure we all love each other!” On the second card, write, “We shouldn’t get bogged down in differences of opinion about doctrine or theology. Let’s focus on the things that unite us, not the things that divide us.” Enlist two volunteers. Give each volunteer one of the prepared cards. Say: Imagine you’re putting together an evangelism team for our church. You have one more slot on your committee, and you have to choose between these two people. Who would you choose, and why? Instruct the volunteers to read their cards. Discuss: How do we balance the urgency of the gospel message with the command in verse 3? And how do we make sure we don’t compromise the message of the gospel for the sake of keeping the unity of the Spirit?

STUDY: Create small teams. Distribute copies of Pack Item 12 (Handout: Unity in the New Testament). Direct the teams to review the PSG (p. 67) and the handout. Encourage each team to determine ways to balance the two extremes presented. Call for ideas.

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 4:4-6, as the group keeps track of how many times the word “one” is used.
EMPHASIZE: Point out that these verses highlight a different Person of the Trinity. Lead the group to discover what the passage teaches about the Spirit (v. 4); the Son (v. 5); and the Father (v. 6). Refer to Pack Item 13 (Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians) to aid the discussion.

ASK: How should a believer’s relationships with others mirror the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? (PSG, p. 70)

SUMMARIZE: Each Person of the Trinity has a different role. God is the Creator. Christ is the Redeemer. The Holy Spirit is the Indwelling Presence. They are distinct, yet united. While we can never fully comprehend this reality, the Trinity should guide us in our effort to be more unified with one another.

TRANSITION: When we walk worthy of our calling and live unified with one another, we can live in celebration of the victory won by Jesus.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Ephesians 4:7-10, directing the group to listen for what the passage says about gifts.

ASK: What gifts do believers receive as a result of Jesus’ victory?

HIGHLIGHT: The first time we read about something given to believers is in verse 7. We receive grace as a gift from Christ, which is His sacrifice on the cross. Verse 8 says that He gave “gifts”—plural—to people. What does this mean? Emphasize from the PSG (p. 70): With the gift of salvation came other gifts of God’s grace that were to be used to build up the body of Christ.

ASK: How is the giving of spiritual gifts a celebration of Jesus’ victory?


SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DISCUSS: Review the statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 72) to present a summary of the study. Ask: Do you believe we can have victory in Christ if we do not have unity in Christ? Why or why not? In what particular attitude could you grow and thereby benefit the unity in our church relationships?

CHALLENGE: Call attention to the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 72): How could your small group become more visible in its celebration of the victory won by Jesus?

PRAY: Lead in prayer, asking God to help the group maintain the unity of the Spirit this week.
PRACTICE

- Reach out to those who were not present to secure any prayer requests and ministry concerns. Give a summary of the session and encourage them to study the passage on their own, using their copy of the PSG.
- Consider your social media presence this week. Are you contributing to or detracting from unity by the things you are posting? Be honest about your own social media activity in light of what you taught this week.
- Encourage group members to exercise their spiritual gifts in service through the church in some tangible way this week.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace the Focus Attention activity, write the following on separate strips of paper and place in a hat: football teams, instruments in a symphony orchestra, items in a balanced diet, and jobs listed in movie credits. Direct the group to form small teams of three, draw a strip of paper from the hat, and come up with as many items in that category as they can. Discuss which of those roles are most important, and what would happen if any of those were removed, or stopped working. Introduce the topic of unity within the body of Christ.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the discussion of Ephesians 4:1-3, ask for a show of hands of anyone who has broken or injured any body part from their hips to their toes. Ask: What impact did that broken bone or injury have on your ability to walk? How did it affect your balance? Discuss how every part of the leg is necessary for walking properly. Emphasize the connection between walking worthy and living in unity.
- To enhance the study of Ephesians 4:7-10, print several pictures of sports fans celebrating their team’s victory. Lead the group to explain how a championship can create a sense of pride and accomplishment for an entire city or even country, even though the people celebrating had nothing to do with winning the game. Compare the illustration to experiencing the blessings of Christ’s victory, even though we had nothing to do with it.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group in brainstorming how they can contribute to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace this week. Discuss the connection between your community’s receptivity of the gospel and your church’s expression of unity. Ask from the PSG (p. 71): How might the current level of unity in your church impact receptivity to the gospel in your community? How could you change this for the better?

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Play the song “Make Us One,” by Jesus Culture, as your closing prayer. For a more traditional alternative, play the hymn “Bind Us Together,” by Bob Gillman.
Walking Forward

Christ gives the church gifted leaders to help believers mature and minister.

Ephesians 4:11-16

Memory Verses: Ephesians 4:14-15

Read Ephesians 4:11-16, First Thoughts (p. 84), and Understand the Context (p. 84). Note the progression of development and how the equipping of believers contributes to the overall health of a church.

Study Ephesians 4:11-16, using Explore the Text on pages 85–89. As you study, focus on how Christ gives the church gifted leaders to help believers mature and minister. Identify the specific ways God has gifted you to lead.

Plan Ephesians 4:11-16, using Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 90–91) and More Ideas (p. 92). Keep in mind ways you can use this text to help people better understand why God gives spiritual gifts to His people, and how your group members are uniquely gifted. Also refer to QuickSource and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible for other ideas.

Grow with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).

Gather the following items: Personal Study Guides; and Encouraging quotes made by famous coaches. Prepare to display the following Pack Item: PACK ITEM 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus). Make copies of: PACK ITEM 7 (Handout: Ephesians Time Line); and PACK ITEM 10 (Handout: Ephesians and Colossians).
FIRST THOUGHTS

Gift giving is part of life. On special occasions and holidays we give gifts to one another. Sometimes, they are given in a perfunctory manner with little forethought about the recipient. On other occasions they are enthusiastically received because they meet a great need. The giver of the gift is always glad to hear the other person say, “I have been needing one of these!”

(In PSG, p. 73) **Name a gift you received that you didn’t appreciate at first but later came to realize how much you needed it.**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

**EPHESIANS 4:11-16**

The Ephesians lived in a world with many different kinds of leaders. Certainly, the most exalted political leader was the emperor of the Roman Empire. He held power over a vast kingdom. As the capital of Asia Minor, Ephesus was a colony of Rome with many political leaders living in the area. One of those, a city clerk, is mentioned in Acts 19:35.

In addition to political leaders, Ephesus was accustomed to many religious leaders living within its confines. Priests and priestesses served the many foreign gods located within the city. Each had their own responsibilities in conducting worship and fulfilling the duties required by those above them.

The Jews also had leaders in Ephesus. This included rulers of the synagogue (Acts 19:9) and also itinerant Jewish leaders who performed exorcisms (Acts 19:13). It included traveling preachers, such as Paul, who were invited to speak in the Ephesian synagogues.

It took a variety of leaders to conduct both the political and religious business in Ephesus. People were accustomed to leaders. Leaders provided guidance for the people. Without the people, the leaders would have been ineffective in their duties and useless in their purpose. The same was true for the church when it came to the need for leadership. In this passage, Paul detailed some of the leaders called and gifted by God for the church. He emphasized the purpose of their calling.

Jesus is the ultimate leader of the church, but He has gifted others to provide leadership within the church under His direction. These human leaders are not gifted to do all the work of the church. Rather, they are gifted to organize and administrate the work of the church so that all the members might do the work of the church together.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

EQUIPPERS GIVEN (EPH. 4:11)

VERSE 11
As Paul entered the second half of his letter to the Ephesians, he began to show how theology impacted daily life. He had talked about unity and diversity in the body of Christ (Eph. 4:1-6). He had emphasized that people were gifted with various gifts, but they served the same Lord (4:7-10). With so many gifted people in the body of Christ, the church needed leaders to coordinate and encourage those gifted people in their growth into spiritual maturity. In verse 11 Paul listed gifts of those who were called to build up the church. He listed five different callings, but by the grammatical construction he indicated four different positions.

The use of the pronoun, he himself, emphasizes the fact that Christ is the one who sovereignly calls and gifts people to ministries that serve the church. All of these gifts were needed within the body to build the church to maturity. Though the list of gifts is thorough, it probably was not intended to be exhaustive. These gifts were foundational to the development of the early church, but other leadership roles would develop within the history of the church to continue providing leadership.

The first gift that Paul mentioned was -apostles. This word was used in three ways in the New Testament. First, apostle was used to describe those who were sent with a message. This is the lexical meaning of the word. It was used of Epaphroditus, who was a messenger sent to Paul with the letter of Philippians (Phil. 2:25). Second, the word apostles often referred to the twelve disciples of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:5; Rev. 21:14). They were eyewitnesses of Christ and could validate the teachings and ministry of Jesus. If Paul used the term in this sense, then apostles would not be a valid group of leaders in our day because they died in the days of the early church. However, there is a third way that apostle is used in the New Testament. Others who were not a part of the twelve had the designation, apostle. Paul was an apostle, as was Barnabas (Acts 14:14). James the brother of Jesus was also called an apostle (Gal. 1:19). Timothy and Silas, coworkers of Paul who helped write 1 Thessalonians, did not want to be “a burden as Christ’s apostles” (1 Thess. 1:1; 2:6-7). Paul seemed to place both himself and Apollos into the category of apostles in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:6,9). This third category seemed to represent those who were in leadership in the early church, providing pastoral leadership in a role similar to a modern-day missionary or church planter.

The second calling Paul mentioned was -prophets. Already in Ephesians he had connected apostles and prophets as foundational to the establishment of the church (Eph. 2:20; 3:5). Prophets in the Old Testament were those who either revealed the Word of God to people in their generation (forthtelling) or predicted the future as God revealed it to them (foretelling). This dual function continued in the New Testament. Agabus the prophet predicted the Judean famine and Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem (Acts 11:28; 21:10-11). As Paul described the gift in other places, it seemed to be a gift that was
used to edify the church (1 Cor. 14:22). This was a gift which the church was not to put aside (1 Thess. 5:20-22) and one that was needed within the body of Christ (1 Cor. 14:1). The early church needed those gifted to bring a message to the body of Christ, and the church today also needs those who are gifted to apply the Word of God to specific situations.

A third way Christ gifted His church was by sending **evangelists.** While **prophets** brought their message to the church, evangelists were gifted to proclaim the gospel to those outside the church. By using their gift to share the gospel with the lost, they encouraged others within the body to lead others to faith in Christ. Luke referred to Philip as an evangelist (Acts 21:8), and Paul encouraged Timothy to do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5). Though the whole church was called to evangelize, people gifted in this area built up others so that they would also engage people outside of the church with the gospel.

The grammatical structure of verse 11 indicates that the final two roles were functions of the same office—**some pastors and teachers.** Each office prior to these had its own usage of some, but the final two roles are grouped together with the word some. They represent the work of the pastor-teacher in the church. The pastor of the church had two primary roles in his congregation. First, he was the shepherd of that congregation, which is the meaning of the word for pastor. The idea of leaders as shepherds of the flock was a common Old Testament idea (2 Sam. 5:2; Ps. 78:71-72; Jer. 23:2; Ezek. 34:10). A pastor is charged with the care of the congregation. The second function of the pastor was as teacher. The pastor was not necessarily the only teacher of the church. Others could teach who were not pastors, but the responsibility of that teaching ministry rested with the pastor.

**TO MOVE BELIEVERS FORWARD** (EPH. 4:12-14)

**VERSES 12-13**

Why does Jesus gift leaders with the callings mentioned in verse 11? Verse 12 provides the answer to this question. The last part of the verse indicates the goal of this gifting, and the first part of the verse indicates the way that purpose would be accomplished.

The individuals gifted for building up the church are not superstars, and they are not to use their gifts to bring attention to themselves.

The goal of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers was to build up the body of Christ. These gifts do not exist for the sake of the gifted or for the glory of the gifted. They exist for the good of the church. The word for build up previously occurred in Ephesians 2:21, where the new temple made up of Jews and Gentiles was being put together into a holy temple in the Lord. It implied the growth of a building or structure. In both cases in Ephesians, it meant the growth of the body of Christ. The term body often referred to the church as an extension of Jesus (Rom. 7:4; 12:5;
The individuals gifted for building up the church are not superstars, and they are not to use their gifts to bring attention to themselves. They are humble servants dedicated to helping the local congregation to engage the world around them.

How do the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers build up the church? Their role is *equipping the saints for the work of ministry.* The role of the church leaders is not to do the work of ministry but to equip the entire church body to do that work. The word *equipping* was sometimes used to refer to the mending of a net (Matt. 4:21) or the restoration of those who had fallen (Gal. 6:1). In places outside the Bible it referred to the setting of a broken bone. The mending role of church leaders rules out divisiveness that often divides the flock. Rather, they are setting everything right in the church so that every person has the opportunity to do the work of ministry. The word *ministry* is the same word used to designate the deacon. It emphasizes a servant role.

How does your church view its leaders—as equippers of ministry or doers of ministry?

Verse 13 further defines what it means to build up the body of Christ. First, the body of Christ should strive that everyone would *reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son.* Paul had previously indicated that everyone in the church shared one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph. 4:5). Though faith has several usages in the New Testament, here it seems to refer to the body of doctrine that people believe about the gospel. Those who serve the church as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers have a goal of equipping the church so that it is not divided by false doctrine. The church must be together in *the faith,* and an important part of that faith is the *knowledge* of God’s Son.

Secondly, building up the body of Christ involves *growing into maturity.* The Greek literally stated “into a perfect man.” Paul’s desire was that church members would move out of infancy and into their responsibility as spiritually full-grown adults. The church should be characterized by maturity rather than childish behavior, and its leaders should equip the members of the church to move from infancy to maturity in their faith.

The measure of maturity in the church is how much it looks like Christ.

Thirdly, to build up the church means to aim for *a stature measured by Christ’s fullness.* The measuring stick for any church is not some other church or some objective standard outside of Christ. The measure of maturity in the church is how much it looks like Christ. Paul previously...
referred to the church as “the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way” (Eph. 1:23). The church is an expression of Christ. As the church matures, it looks more and more like Christ.

**Im mature Christians are gullible and easily deceived.**

**VERSE 14**

14 Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit.

As the church matured, Paul believed it would know how to stand the onslaught of false teaching that would arise. He said that mature believers would no longer be little children. In contrast to the maturity mentioned in the previous verse, Paul referred to immature members as little children who could not take care of themselves. Immature Christians are gullible and easily deceived.

Immature church members will be tossed by the waves. Like a small child caught in the pounding of the surf, they have little power to stand against those who teach false doctrine. He also described them as blown around by every wind of teaching. Like a child in gale force winds, immature church members are unable to remain firm in their faith.

Paul characterized the false teaching that threatened the church as human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. The Greek word for cunning was used to refer to a person’s cheating in games using dice. Cleverness was associated with Satan and his deceit of Adam and Eve. False teachers cheat and seduce others through their techniques of deceit, and immature Christians are powerless to know they are straying from the truth. The work of leaders in preparing the church to stand against such an onslaught is crucial.

(In PSG, p. 78) How does each action identified by Paul in verses 12-14 pave the way for the next action or result identified?

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**VERSE 15**

15 But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ.

Some will use the truth to their own advantage or to club those whom they don’t value.

**AS A BODY** (EPH. 4:15-16)

While the false teachers in the previous section used deceit and falsehood, Paul encouraged followers of Christ to be characterized by speaking the truth in love. Speaking the truth is a characteristic of a mature believer and a mature church. However, one can speak the truth but not do so in love. Speaking the truth in the most loving way is a quality of maturity that should be deeply valued in the church. Some will use the truth to their own advantage or to club those whom they don’t value. Paul’s vision was of a
body that is not afraid to speak the truth but always does so in the context of loving relationships.

As the leaders and members of Christ’s body speak the truth in love, the church will grow in every way into him who is the head. Paul wants the body to grow into maturity in relationship to the head, which is Christ. The head of the church is not the pastor or some other prominent member. The standard is Jesus. As the head, Jesus is responsible as both the leader and nourisher of the body. He is actively involved in stimulating and facilitating growth in the body.

VERSE 16
In our physical health, we understand the wholeness of the body. Problems in one part of the body affect other parts. Likewise, it is the whole body, fitted and knit together that is called to fulfill the purposes of God in the world. The whole church is dependent upon Christ just as the body is dependent upon every ligament that joins its independent parts together. Anyone who has ever torn an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) or bruised a medial collateral ligament (MCL) knows the importance of every part being held together and working efficiently. Those who have experienced such trauma know that the proper working of each individual part is dependent upon the thing that holds it together. It is Christ who holds everything together (Col. 1:17).

When church members are properly related to Christ, they also will be properly related to one another.

Christ as the head who holds all things together promotes the growth of the body. Spiritual maturity cannot come apart from the working of Christ as the head of the body. When church members are properly related to Christ, they also will be properly related to one another. As individual believers grow in Christlikeness, they will in turn begin to help the other parts of the body achieve maturity as well.

What are the areas where your church works together well?
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCTION: Search the Internet for encouraging quotes made by famous coaches (search using “encouraging coach quotes”). As the group arrives, call attention to selected quotes displayed in the room. Ask: How can the right coach inspire a team to greatness? Explain that owners provide coaches with the intent of them helping the team perform to their potential.

STATE: God gives the church gifted leaders who help believers mature and live out the mission God has given them.

EXPLAIN: One of the main responsibilities of any leader or coach is to facilitate growth and positive change in the lives of those who follow them. They can tell when their players are stronger and better than they believe. Good coaches push the players to grow in strength, self-confidence, and unity as a team. In much the same way, God gives the church gifted leaders who help believers mature and live out the mission God has given them.

REVIEW: Discuss key points from Understand the Context in the PSG (p. 74). Direct the group to Pack Item 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus) and distribute copies of Pack Item 7 (Handout: Ephesians Time Line). Review these items to remind the group of the context for this Letter to the Ephesians.

TRANSITION: With Ephesians 4–6, Paul focused on the practical application of how believers daily grow in spiritual maturity. A key aspect of this growth is through God’s gift of spiritual leaders in the church.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Read aloud Ephesians 4:11, giving emphasis to who gave the gifts to leaders.

EXPLAIN: Several times in his letters, Paul wrote about spiritual gifts given from God to His people for use in the church. The list in Ephesians 4 stands out for its emphasis on the giftedness of church leaders.

MINI-LECTURE: Direct the group to pages 75–76 of the PSG to gain insight about the roles Paul identified. Draw attention to Jesus giving the church these leaders.

ASK: What are the implications of viewing church leaders as Christ’s gifts to the church? (PSG, p. 75)

STATE: Emphasize from the PSG (p. 76): Every gifted leader serves an important role in the church. No leader possesses all these gifts and callings, which is why Paul repeated the word “some” in his descriptions. The giftedness of church leaders is varied but all the gifts are needed. They are God’s appointed means to equip His church for ministry and mission.

TRANSITION: In verse 11, Paul described who God uniquely equipped for leadership. In verses 12-13, he answered the question of why gifted leaders are needed in the church.

READ: Create small teams. Direct the teams to read Ephesians 4:12-13, paying attention to the reasons Paul identified for giving the leaders.
HIGHLIGHT: Christ gave gifted leaders to the church for two reasons, supported in this text: 1) equipping the saints for the work of ministry, and 2) building up the body of Christ.

ASK: From these verses, what can we conclude is the goal of this equipping and building up of believers?

STATE: Christ gave us spiritual leaders in order to move believers forward toward spiritual maturity. With the help of godly leaders, believers can grow in their belief and understanding of the gospel and participate more fully in the church’s mission.

ASK: Paul drew a direct correlation between the mind-set and the mission of the body of Christ. How does the equipping of people for service contribute to the development of confidence in God’s truth?

EXAMINE: Direct a volunteer to read Ephesians 4:14 aloud and take a closer look at each of the descriptive phrases and actions Paul included. How does each action identified by Paul in verses 12-14 pave the way for the next action or result identified? (PSG, p. 78)

CONSIDER: God gives gifted leaders to the church who teach the truth and apply it to this cultural moment in time. This type of equipping helps believers move forward in their faith and maturity. Share with the group about a time when your faith was moved forward by the type of equipping mentioned here. Then invite one or two volunteers to share their examples.

TRANSITION: Paul concluded this section of his letter with a reminder that maturity is seen in a confident faith in Christ, and that confidence always has a positive impact on the entire body of Christ.

READ: As you read verses 15-16 aloud, call for the group to visualize the metaphor Paul used in these verses.

STUDY: Lead the group to complete the Bible Skill (PSG, p. 80). Then ask: Why do you think Jesus compared the church to a body? Lead the group to see that growing in Christlikeness together is the goal not only of spiritual leaders but of the church body as a whole.

ASK: Why might a person’s ability to express God’s love increase with spiritual maturity? (PSG, p. 79)

DISCUSS: Paul closed this section on spiritual leadership and the forward movement of the church with a visual imagery of the human body. Lead the group to discuss how this analogy illustrates the health of the church body. Then ask: What are some other ways of illustrating Paul’s point other than a human body? (PSG, p. 80) Why is it important to remember that love is the motive for our ministry, both to one another and to the world?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

CONCLUDE: Jesus’ mission on earth was one motivated and defined by love, and Paul reminded us time and again that ours should be, too.

CHALLENGE: Lead the group to brainstorm answers to the following question (PSG, p. 81): What could your small group do to support the equipping ministry of your pastor and other church leaders?

PRAY: Close in a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the spiritual leaders He has placed in your church. Pray for those church leaders by name.
PRACTICE

• Compile a list of members who have not attended the group in several weeks or months. Call on a few group members to help you make a special effort to reach out lovingly to these brothers and sisters in Christ.

• Spend time personally reflecting on the third question set under In My Context (p. 81): What is your strategy to grow in Christlikeness? What particular attributes do you need to target? Ask God to move you closer to Him.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)
To replace the Focus Attention activity, divide the group into pairs and have them discuss the question on page 73 of the PSG. Have a few partners share their responses with the whole group. When the sharing time is done, read the paragraph from page 73 aloud.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

• To help bring to life the different types of spiritual leaders mentioned in Ephesians 4:11, talk briefly about key biblical characters who model each type: Peter (apostle who walked with Jesus and then told others about Him); John (prophet who recorded the visions God gave Him); Stephen (evangelist who shared the gospel even when it cost him his life); Timothy (pastor who took seriously the responsibility to teach the Word of God to others).

• To further enhance understanding of Ephesians 4:12-14, spend some time brainstorming the differences between spiritual immaturity and spiritual maturity. Write responses on a board, beginning with the differences pointed out in these verses, but including other thoughts or supporting texts the group suggests.

• To support the discussion of the body of Christ in Ephesians 4:15-16, identify Christ as the head of the body. Note that this was also discussed in Colossians 2:19. Distribute copies of Pack Item 10 (Handout: Ephesians and Colossians) and review other similarities between the two letters.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)
Guide the group to create smaller teams and discuss the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 81): As a means to ongoing spiritual maturity in your walk with Christ, list one ministry in which you could participate more fully. What steps do you need to take to become more involved in that ministry? Commit to holding one another accountable in this area of growth.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA
Listen to the song “O Church Arise (Arise, Shine),” by the Gettys. Encourage the group to listen to the lyrics as they think about how God has uniquely crafted the body of Christ to live out His mission.
Walking Differently
Believers are to live a life that is different from those who reject Christ.

EPHESIANS 4:17-32

MEMORY VERSES: EPHESIANS 4:23-24

READ Ephesians 4:17-32, First Thoughts (p. 94), and Understand the Context (p. 94). As you read, think of times in your life when you wanted to distinguish yourself from others or make a good impression.

STUDY Ephesians 4:17-32, using Explore the Text on pages 95–99. As you study, make a note of the contrasts between what was and what should be. Consider how the contrast points to the power of Christ. For more study helps, consult the Explore the Bible Adult Commentary, found in both print and digital format at LifeWay.com.

PLAN group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 100–101), More Ideas (p. 102), and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible. Add variety to your plans for your group in this session by using at least one idea from More Ideas. Consider how to implement the Suggested Music Idea (p. 102).

GAIN insights from the weekly podcast on Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/ExploreTheBible).

GATHER the following items: □ Personal Study Guides; and For More Ideas (p. 102): □ Note cards or stationery and a church directory, if available. Prepare to display the following Pack Item: □ PACK ITEM 2 (Outline of Ephesians). Make copies of: □ PACK ITEM 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark).
FIRST THOUGHTS

When going to a job interview, we carefully select what to wear. We want to make a statement in some way. We may choose something that makes us feel more confident or that makes us look like we fit the part. Most of us know that showing up in a tie for an entry-level construction job is not required. We may choose a color that matches the company logo or a sport team we believe the owner supports. Setting ourselves apart from other applicants is the goal.

(In PSG, p. 82) What might a person do to set themselves apart from others applying for a job?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 4:17-32

In chapter four of Ephesians, Paul began to show how theology affects life and behavior. A correct theology of the gospel would lead to unity in the church (Eph. 4:1-10). It would produce leaders in the church who would build it up and help it stand against those who were teaching false doctrines and false practices (Eph. 4:11-16). Finally, he believed that a correct theology of the gospel would help them live a new way of life (Eph. 4:17-32).

The contrast between the way Christians lived and the way pagan unbelievers in Ephesus lived could not have been more pronounced. The standards of morality were drastically different. Paul often had to deal with immorality issues in the church. (See 1 Cor. 5:1; 2 Cor. 12:21; 1 Thess. 4:3-7.) Such behaviors were expressions of unfaithfulness to God. Gentiles may have brazenly practiced such things, but Paul knew salvation brought change in a person’s ethics and behavior.

Jesus criticized the prayer practices of the Gentiles who babbled many words and thought that because of their volume they would be heard (Matt. 6:7). He also noted their vain pursuit of material things (Matt. 6:32). Luke noted their role in the crucifixion of Christ (Luke 18:32). Paul emphasized that the name of God was blasphemed among the Gentiles (Rom. 2:24). He encouraged the Christians in Thessalonica not to embrace the sexual ethic of the Gentiles but to live by a different ethic (1 Thess. 4:5). Peter described the Gentiles’ behavior as “carrying on in unrestrained behavior, evil desires, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and lawless idolatry” (1 Pet. 4:3). As seen from this brief survey, life in the culture to which Paul brought the gospel was much different than life in Christ. This included both actions and worship practices. Should a Christian convert from the Gentile culture change his behavior, or should his behavior continue as it was before he came to Christ? This was the question Paul addressed in Ephesians 4:17-32.

KEY DOCTRINE

Justification

Justification brings the believer unto a relationship of peace and favor with God (Rom. 5:1).

BIBLE SKILL

Compare passages that include the same phrases.

Compare Ephesians 4:17-32 with Romans 6:6; Colossians 3:5-10; 1 Corinthians 2:14; and Galatians 5:19-23. Write down some notes about what each passage adds to your understanding of the old and new man. How can the old man still be a problem if he was crucified with Christ on the cross (Gal. 2:20)? Why is the battle between the old man and the new man such an important concept for daily living?
EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE OLD (EPH. 4:17-19)

VERSE 17
Paul emphasized the importance of his words with the note, *I say this and testify in the Lord.* This is a warning in the strongest possible terms. His calling out of Christians from their former way of life was not his own idea of purity but was from the Lord.

Paul encouraged the Ephesians to *no longer live as the Gentiles live.* By referring to *Gentiles,* Paul was not making a derogatory ethnic statement. He was using the term in a moral sense. Paul knew Jesus’ teaching concerning His desire to save the Gentiles (Luke 2:32), and the apostle taught the same thing (Rom. 1:5). He was not condemning the Gentile people but the Gentile moral ethic that was in direct opposition to the Christian moral ethic. A change to loyalty to Christ would be noted by a change in one's behavior.

The first description of the Gentile moral ethic is that they lived *in the futility of their thoughts.* The idea of *futility* was uselessness or emptiness. It was the same word used in the Greek Old Testament to describe life outside the fear of God (Eccl. 1:2,14). For the writer of Ecclesiastes, life apart from the fear of God was empty and meaningless. Paul believed that life apart from Christ was the same.

VERSE 18
The result of futile thinking in the unbeliever is that *they are darkened in their understanding.* God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). In turn, God has revealed light and wisdom to those who have turned to Him (Ps. 118:27). The Gentile moral ethic is not merely empty, it is *darkened.* Their thinking is not only empty but it is also evil. Who would ever think to invent all the sinful ways of the world? Only a person whose thinking is empty and evil can envision all the many ways to offend God. Paul described this condition in Romans 1:21, “their senseless hearts were darkened.” The old way of life should be a stark contrast to the life that is in Christ.

The goal of Christianity is not to make bad people better but to make dead people alive.

Paul also described the Gentile moral ethic as being *excluded from the life of God.* Previously, Paul had described the Ephesians before their coming to Christ as “dead in ... trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Though their lives reflected many evil and immoral ways, their most dire need was life. Their sins were an expression of their deadness to the life of God. Though some philosophies, such as Stoicism, taught that a person could adjust his or her thinking to conform to a higher moral ethic, Paul did not teach such possibilities. Non-Christians were separated from the life-giving power of God. The goal of Christianity is not to make bad people better but to make dead people alive. Before coming to Christ, we were dead and had no access to the life of God.
The reasons for this deadness were the **ignorance** in them and their own **hardness** of heart. The Greek word used for ignorance has been adapted in English to form the word **agnostic**. Their ignorance was not mere stupidity or lack of knowledge about things. It was a lack of knowing God. The problem of Gentile thinking didn’t stem from lack of knowledge about right and wrong but the lack of knowing God. In turn, this produced a callousing effect on the heart that rendered them incapable of sensitivity toward God apart from the work of the Holy Spirit (John 6:44).

**VERSE 19**

The hardness of their hearts (v. 18) caused those outside of Christ to become callous. A person who is calloused cannot feel pain and loses sensitivity to touch. Before coming to Christ, a person is not only dead to God but deadened in their pain. They are insensitive to the ways and movements of God. As a result, people outside of Christ gave themselves over to **promiscuity**. Romans 1 teaches that those outside of a relationship with God are given over by God to an immoral life (Rom. 1:24,26,28), but here the emphasis is that they gave themselves over to immorality. No conflict exists between these two statements, but rather they are complementary.

Promiscuity referred to all types of self-indulgent living. It involved a lack of moral restraint and included every kind of impurity. This would include sexual immorality (2 Pet. 2:2), drinking and partying, and elements of false worship. This pursuit was not a one-time occurrence—they had a desire for more and more. This describes the continual downward spiral of the moral ethic in those who do not follow Christ.

Why does life outside of Christ usually spiral downward morally?

**THE CHANGE** (EPH. 4:20-24)

**VERSES 20-21**

But that is not how you came to know Christ, assuming you heard about him and were taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus,
they had truly come to Christ and were following Him instead of the false teachers. He was not hedging on the permanency of salvation or the ability of God to finish His work in a believer. He was questioning the supposed profession of those who claimed to follow Christ but continued to live like those outside of Christ. Paul reminded them that the truth is in Jesus. Jesus had declared Himself as the Truth (John 14:6), and those in relationship with Him should grow in their faith to continue reflecting that truth in the way they live.

VERSES 22-23
In addition to describing new life in Christ as a school, Paul described it as changing clothes. Like an old, dirty garment, the Christian will desire to take off the old way of life that was empty and without God (Eph. 4:17-18). This former way of life is the old self that is corrupted by evil desires. Coming to Christ enables believers to shed the old way of life like shedding a pair of dirty clothes. However, it must still be possible for a Christian to continue wearing some of those old garments, hence the command to take off this old self. In Christ, the old nature can be taken off like an unwanted piece of clothing.

The battle for one’s behavior is really a battle for one’s mind.

What the person outside of a relationship with Christ needs is to be renewed. The renewal of old, corrupted nature takes place in the spirit of one’s mind. Paul taught the Romans to present themselves to God as living sacrifices, and he promised that the Lord would renew their minds (Rom. 12:1-2). In Colossians, Paul said that believers had put on the new self and were being renewed in knowledge according to the image of their Creator (Col. 3:10). He spoke of this in terms of an ongoing process, not an instantaneous discovery. The process of renewal was day by day. As the believer continued to die to the old way of life, God continued to renew the person into the person He had made them to be. This change in behavior had to start with a change in their minds. The battle for one’s behavior is really a battle for one’s mind.

Why do you think the battle for behavior is really a battle for the mind?

VERSE 24
Taking off the old man and having the mind renewed opened the way to put on the new self. Old ways must be replaced with new ways. This involved a new identity given to the believer at the time of conversion (Col. 3:10). This is a growing and daily recognition of who the believer is in Christ. Paul described this person as the one created according to God’s likeness. Humans were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). This image was not
completely lost by the fall, which is the reason murder is an offense to God (Gen. 9:6). However, that image was tarnished and will one day be completely restored (1 Cor. 15:49). The process of restoration began at conversion and continues as one takes off the old self and puts on the new self. The desire of God for His children is righteousness and purity of the truth.

THE NEW (EPH. 4:25-32)

VERSE 25
In the language of changing clothes, Paul explained that Christians should be putting away lying and in its place should speak the truth, each one to his neighbor. Paul had already emphasized truth three times in this section (Eph. 4:15, 21, 24). The old way of life was willing to say anything to any person regardless of the truth. If it benefited the old person, then the Gentile moral ethic was self-preservation. The way of Christ was to speak the truth to build up the whole body of Christ.

Uncontrolled anger gives the devil an opportunity.

VERSE 26-27
The old way of life before Christ was to hold on to anger and harbor grudges and bitterness toward others. That is not the way of Christ. Paul encouraged the Christian to be angry and do not sin. The text does not say, do not be angry. Righteous indignation is holy anger against sin, and it is legitimate. Christians cannot be indifferent to injustice and evil. A righteous anger must exist toward displays of unrighteousness. Anger is an emotion and the response to its presence is more important than whether or not it exists.

In anger, Christians need to take guard in two ways. First, they should not let the sun go down on your anger. They need to keep short accounts and address anger as it occurs. The longer anger simmers the more destructive it can become. Second, they need to not give the devil an opportunity. Uncontrolled anger gives the devil an opportunity. Pride or hatred creates problems for the old self, but the new self deals with anger in constructive ways.

VERSE 28
Like his or her father, the devil, the unsaved person sees what he wants and tries to take it. This must be removed and replaced with a heart to do honest work. The old person takes from others in order to meet his or her own desires. The new person is able to share with others in order to meet their need. This is a huge contrast in one’s approach to life. The old person is consumed with the gratification of self; the new person is focused on the needs of others. Work was valued in the New Testament (1 Cor. 4:12; 1 Thess. 4:11), and even more so when it was done for the purpose of giving to others.
VERSES 29-30
The old person used foul language. The word used for foul could refer to rotten fruit (Matt. 7:17-18) and rotten fish (Matt. 13:48-49). It was not simply bad language but included any kind of talk that had intentions of harm or ill will toward others, such as gossip or slander. Instead, believers should use their speech for building up someone in need. This refers to a timely word delivered at the right moment to lift someone up. (See Prov. 15:23.) This kind of word gives grace to its hearers. Jesus has given grace to every believer (Eph. 4:7), and He desires that His children pass grace along to others as they need it. Corrupting talk not only affects those to which it is spoken; it also will grieve God’s Holy Spirit. It shows an insensitivity to God, as do any of the acts of the old self mentioned in this passage.

How can we use our words to give grace to others?

VERSES 31-32
Paul encouraged Christians to let go of the attitudes that harm relationships with others. These include attitudes of bitterness, anger and wrath. Seething bitterness leads to impassioned anger, which leads to outright opposition against others. These relationship hindrances could also lead to shouting and slander, and malice. The old self is contentious toward others.

The motive for Christians to forgive others is that God also forgave them in Christ.

The new self, on the other hand, is kind and compassionate and forgiving of one another. The first word describes a sweet disposition, while the second word emphasizes the feeling and emotion that empathizes with another person. At some point, every relationship will need to be marked by forgiveness. The motive for Christians to forgive others is that God also forgave them in Christ. If Jesus could forgive us for all of our sins, then surely those who have been forgiven can in turn forgive those who have wronged them.

VERSES 29-30
29 No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear. 30 And don’t grieve God’s Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption.

VERSES 31-32
31 Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. 32 And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: As the group arrives, encourage them to scan the room. Call for everyone to close their eyes while you change something in the room. Invite them to open their eyes and point out what was changed (examples: placement of a chair, location of your name tag, arrangement of posters). Repeat until most have arrived.

ASK: How hard (or easy) was it to spot the change?

EXPLAIN: Some Christians have dramatic testimonies of a radical life change when they became Christians. Others have more “ordinary” testimonies of having grown up in church. Regardless, there ought to be a difference between how we were before we met Christ and how we are now. The section of Ephesians 4 we’re discussing today is all about that difference. Point to Pack Item 2 (Outline of Ephesians) displayed in the room to highlight that today’s study is on “A New Self.”

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Before the Scripture passage is read, note that Paul used the word Gentiles to refer to unbelievers. While a volunteer reads aloud Ephesians 4:17-19, direct the group to listen for how Paul characterized unbelievers.

CHART: On the board or a sheet of paper, make two columns, labeled Ignorance and Sinfulness. Direct the group to identify which descriptions from verses 17-19 are related to a lack of understanding about God and which are related to a lack of obedience to God. Ask: In what way is life prior to knowing Christ “pointless”? (PSG, p. 84)

COMPARE/CONTRAST: Remark that Paul used very similar language in Romans. Direct every other person in the group to locate Romans 1:21-25, while the others reread Ephesians 4:17-19. Direct the group to work in pairs, looking for similarities and differences between the two passages. Note that the sin wasn’t ignorance. The sin was hard and calloused hearts.

ASK: Why does the “desire for more and more” apart from God always result in futility and emptiness?

DISCUSS: Why would Paul take so much time describing the sinfulness of those without Christ? Ask from the PSG (p. 85): Why is it important for believers to remember what life apart from Christ was like?

EMPHASIZE: Believers need to remember what life apart from Christ was like so that we don’t lose compassion for those who don’t yet know Jesus.

DISCUSS: Before the Scripture is read, say: Think about an important lesson or skill you have learned. How did you learn it? Who did you learn it from?

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 4:20-24. Direct the group to pay attention to what Paul said about how people come to know Christ.

LEAD: Use the information under verses 20-21 (PSG, p. 86) to lead the group to discuss how we learn and grow as believers.
**DISCUSS:** In what way is growing in your understanding of something as much about “unlearning” as it is about learning? What examples can you give from your life?

**EMPHASIZE:** Distribute copies of Pack Item 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark) to anyone who doesn’t have one. Point out that Ephesians 4:23-24 is the memory verse for this session. Lead the group to say the verse aloud together.

**ASK:** How is salvation like putting on a new set of clothes?

**TRANSITION:** In the next set of verses, Paul got very specific about what it looks like to put on Christ. He moved from talking about what is true to what we’re to do in response to that truth.

**READ:** Call on a volunteer to read Ephesians 4:25-32. As the Scripture is read, encourage the group to identify which directive may be the most challenging for them.

**ASK:** Where is your “growing edge” related to these attitudes? Do any of them come easier for you? Give group members an opportunity to affirm positive traits from the list that they see in others in the group. Be prepared with some of your own affirmations for each person.

**HIGHLIGHT:** Point out the Key Doctrine (Justification) on page 87 of the PSG. Note that we are justified because of what Christ did for us on the cross. Emphasize that Christlike attitudes identified by Paul, while desirable, are not what justify us.

**DISCUSS:** We’ve talked about which of these are the most challenging for us. But now, let’s talk about which of these, if we get them right, will have the greatest impact on our community for the gospel.

**ASK:** Of the practices listed by Paul, which one creates the greatest impact for the cause of Christ? (PSG, p. 89) Remind group members of the main point of today’s session—that we who belong to Christ are to live in a noticeably different way from those who reject Christ.

**AFFIRM:** A few moments ago, we were encouraged to call out the positive characteristics we saw in others. Did you notice that in doing so, we were actually being obedient to Ephesians 4:29? What are some ways we can build up and encourage those outside our group?

**HIGHLIGHT:** Summarize the paragraph explaining verses 31-32 (PSG, p. 89). Emphasize that the attitudes of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness we are to show to one another are the attitudes that Jesus has toward us.

**SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)**

**REVIEW:** Lead the group to identify one thing from today’s session that will help them grow in Christlikeness.

**CHALLENGE:** Call attention to the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 90): Identify a neighbor or coworker who is lost. How can you use these passages to explain salvation to the person you identified?

**PRAY:** Lead in prayer, thanking God for how He has forgiven you, and asking for His power to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to others.
PRACTICE

• Email the group during the week and encourage them to take a personal inventory of their actions and attitudes this week. Challenge them to evaluate their actions and attitudes based on Ephesians 4:25-32.

• Look for personal opportunities to share the gospel with someone this week. Be prepared to tell your story next week.

• Encourage the group to find tangible ways to encourage each other this week.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace the Focus Attention activity, invite group members to pull out their smartphones and scroll through their social media feeds. Ask: What makes you know that someone's values, attitudes, beliefs, or lifestyles are different from the other people in your feed? What differences would someone see on your own time line? Then discuss what it means to express a different attitude or belief system in real life and not just online.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

• To further illustrate Paul’s “put off/put on” imagery in Ephesians 4:20-24, invite people to share times in their lives when they knew it was time to update their wardrobe. Maybe it was when they started a new career. Maybe they realized that their own clothes were out of date or no longer fit. Encourage them to identify styles or fads that were popular in high school that they would never think of wearing today. Introduce the topic of actions and attitudes that are appropriate or inappropriate for believers, comparing them to fashion they would not wear today.

• To add to your study of Ephesians 4:25-32, provide note cards or stationery, along with a list of homebound members of your church (or anyone else you feel may need encouragement). Guide the group to write notes of encouragement to individuals. Provide a church directory so you can address the notes. During this time, use the Suggested Music Ideas below.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to write out their testimonies of their lives before Christ, how they met Christ, and how their lives have been different since meeting Christ. Over the next several group meetings, explain that volunteers will have an opportunity to share their story.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Play the song “Different,” by Micah Taylor, either as part of your closing prayer or as everyone is writing encouraging notes. (See above.) For a more traditional alternative, play the hymn, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” by Robert Robinson.
Walking in Love
Believers are to imitate Christ by demonstrating His love and character.

Ephesians 5:1-14

Memory Verses: Ephesians 5:1-2

READ Ephesians 5:1-14, First Thoughts (p. 104), and Understand the Context (p. 104). Make notes about words and concepts that may require additional explanation during the Bible study session.

STUDY Ephesians 5:1-14, using Explore the Text on pages 105–109. As you study, watch for all the words that remind you of God’s forgiveness. Consider what the connection is between God’s forgiveness and our lifestyle.

PLAN the group time, using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 110–111) and More Ideas (p. 112). Keep in mind the main idea that believers are to imitate Christ by demonstrating His love and character. Look for ways to point your group back to this truth throughout the group time. Consult QuickSource (available from LifeWay.com) for additional discussion questions.

GROW with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).

GATHER the following items:
- Personal Study Guides. For Focus Attention (p. 110) you’ll need the following: 
  - Small slips of paper and a pen or pencil for each player;
  - A timer; and
  - A hat or basket. For More Ideas (p. 112), you’ll need:
  - Oil;
  - Three cups;
  - Teaspoons; and
  - Food coloring.
- Prepare to display the following Pack Item: PACK ITEM 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus).
- Make copies of: PACK ITEM 10 (Handout: Ephesians and Colossians).
**FIRST THOUGHTS**

*Gait* is a word that only athletes or medical specialists use very often. It refers to the way a person walks—the movement of a person's limbs while in motion. When there is an abnormality in a person's gait, it can potentially cause health issues. Likewise, every person has a behavioral walk, the way they move through life. One's manner of life is of the utmost importance. In the experience of a follower of Christ, it determines whether Christ's love and character are demonstrated or obscured.

(In PSG, p. 91) **What does a person’s walk reveal about him or her?**

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**UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT**

**EPHESIANS 5:1-14**

Worship in the Roman world was diverse and different from what was found in Israel. The Roman gods exhibited the human traits of passion, love, lust, jealousy, anger, and hate. This caused constant turmoil in the heavens, and this was often the way that the Romans would express the chaos of nature and life. In the town of Lystra, people mistook Barnabas for Zeus and Paul for Hermes, the son of Zeus and his messenger (Acts 14:12). Ephesus, like Lystra, was part of Asia Minor, and though it was bigger and more metropolitan, the gods predominated the religious scene.

The people of Ephesus identified with a goddess named Artemis, known in Roman culture as Diana. She was a Greek virgin goddess of the hunt and was depicted in statue as a many-breasted female. The temple to Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was also the hub of Ephesian economic life. Worship in the temple centered around the Artemision, a week-long festival in the spring dedicated to Artemis. This included erotic ceremonies of dancing and giving of extravagant offerings. The temple became so wealthy that it was the principal financial institution of Asia, receiving deposits and making loans like a bank.

As Paul continued his message to the Ephesians in chapter 5, he seemed to react against those who claimed a conversion to Christianity but continued in the immoral and greedy ways of pagan worship. He encouraged them to imitate God. By doing so, they would leave behind the impure practices of the temple in Ephesus, and they would not be given to greed as those in the financial institution that was in the temple of Artemis.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

IMITATE (EPH. 5:1-2)

VERSE 1
Paul summarized the previous section with an encouragement to be imitators of God. This imperative is in the present tense, which emphasizes continuous action. It is not a one-time arrival at being god-like but a pursuit of being like God that is continuous in daily life. The word for imitators is the derivative of the English word, mimic. It means to copy someone or to reproduce their actions.

Paul encouraged the Ephesians to look at God and imitate Him. Paul had already laid the foundation for this thought in Ephesians 1:5, where he said, "He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself." A child often wants to copy the behavior of a good parent.

VERSE 2
The specific way Paul wanted the Ephesians to imitate God was to walk in love. Once again Paul used a present imperative here, stressing that this should be an ongoing pursuit of the believer. The Ephesians had already experienced the perfect example of love as Christ also loved them. This happened as Jesus gave himself for them. The ultimate demonstration of love was Jesus laying down His life for sinners on the cross.

Christ’s death was more than a good example; it made it possible for people to experience salvation.

Paul described Jesus’ death in two ways. First, it was sacrificial. This was the same term used in the Greek Old Testament to refer to the ritual of animal sacrifice. Christ’s death was more than a good example; it made it possible for people to experience salvation.

Second, Jesus’ death was a fragrant offering. This term often appeared in the Old Testament to describe the pleasant smell of the burnt offerings regularly sacrificed on the altar (Lev. 1:9,13,17; 2:2). This was the Old Testament description of God’s acceptance of the sacrifice as the aroma went before Him and pleased Him.

(In PSG, p. 94) Does walking in love define what it means to be an imitator of God? Explain.

VERE 2
1 Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR
For additional context, read “Paul’s Use of Light and Darkness,” an archived Biblical Illustrator article provided on the CD-ROM in the Fall 2019 Explore the Bible Leader Pack.
VERSE 3

3 But sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you, as is proper for saints.

VERSE 3
Paul encouraged his readers to remove themselves from any activity or group that displayed behavior contrary to God’s character. The first such activity was sexual immorality and any impurity. Far from the self-sacrifice modeled through the death of Christ, sexual immorality is the epitome of self-indulgence. The biblical ethic of sexual morality would have seemed excessively restrictive to those who were new Gentile converts. Their society accepted adulterous relationships, incest, temple prostitution, and homosexuality. All of these would have been covered in the things Paul prohibited in verse 3.

Paul also encouraged believers to avoid greed. Some commentators believe that this term is a reference to greed for sexual satisfaction, but it is possible that this term appeared with sexual immorality because it was also associated with the temple of Artemis. The culture in Ephesus was consumed with a desire for wealth. Paul cautioned Christians to be careful with the heart when it came to money. (See 1 Tim. 6:10.)

How would you describe the connection between sexual immorality and greed?

Far from the self-sacrifice modeled through the death of Christ, sexual immorality is the epitome of self-indulgence.

VERSES 4-5

4 Obscene and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable, but rather giving thanks.
5 For know and recognize this: Every sexually immoral or impure or greedy person, who is an idolater, does not have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

VERSES 4-5
Paul listed two types of speech that were inappropriate. First, he mentioned obscene and foolish talking. The word for obscene is often translated “filthy” and involved more than speaking obscenities, though it could certainly include that. It could refer to that which was shameful, disgraceful, and debased. By adding the word foolish, Paul was indicating that speech which was not worthy of speaking because it was moronic. When Christians engage in filthy and foolish talk, they disregard the command to imitate God (Eph. 5:1).

Paul also prohibited crude joking. This term literally meant “an easy turn of speech.” Though in Greek literature it often was used in a positive light, here it indicated an inhumane or degrading gesture. It was taking the easy way to get a laugh by something coarse or something better left unsaid.

In the place of vulgar and shameful speech patterns, Paul encouraged believers to be known as those who were giving thanks. If speech is an expression of what is in the heart (Luke 6:45), then it would be expected that thanksgiving should come from the heart of the Christian.
The apostle had a harsh warning for those who lived according to
the ungodly ways he just mentioned. They would have no place in God’s
kingdom. The first type of person Paul mentioned was the **sexually immoral**. Paul was not saying that people will lose their salvation if they commit an
act of sexual immorality. The *sexual immoral, impure* and *greedy* were those
who had not been changed from their old nature to a new person in Christ.
Paul referred to each of these as an **idolater**. Whether they worshiped self, sex, or money, each of these negative categories included people who chose
the worship of the created over the worship of the Creator.

Paul warned his readers that those who practiced these sinful lifestyles
were revealing they had not experienced salvation. They had no **inheritance
in the kingdom of Christ and of God**.

**VERSES 6-7**

People may argue that God is too kind to judge sin or send people to hell. However, Paul implored the Ephesians to **let no one deceive** them. He assured them that not only did God care how they lived, but He would be
the ultimate judge of their lives. He encouraged them not to be led astray by **empty arguments**. He had a similar warning to the Colossians about these
dangerous viewpoints (Col. 2:8).

Paul explained his warning by reminding his readers that **God’s wrath
is coming**. The verb in Greek is a future tense, indicating a final, future date
when God’s wrath completely falls upon those who disobey Him. Though
God’s wrath is already being poured out on those who do not obey Him
(Rom. 1:18-19), no person alive has experienced the full force of His wrath.
Paul emphasized the reason for God’s wrath in the phrase, **because of
these things**. What **things** did Paul mean? Certainly he was referring to the
immoral, impure, and greedy actions mentioned in the previous verses. The
judgment of God was coming to those who were **disobedient**. These were
not Christians who had fallen into sin but those who had never experienced
God’s forgiving grace in their lives.

**If we do not associate with lost people, how will we
fulfill the Great Commission?**

Paul called upon the Ephesians to separate themselves from the
lifestyles of unbelievers. He told them not to **become their partners**. This is
not a prohibition against association with the lost, for if we do not associate
with lost people, how will we fulfill the Great Commission? Rather, it is
a commandment not to participate with them as **partners**. Rather than
association, Paul was condemning participation. The degree of association
with the lost is debatable with each situation, but the degree of participation
with them in their evil deeds is without question. Christians have no place
participating in sexual immorality, greed, or coarse speech.
VERSES 8-10
8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light— 9 for the fruit of the light consists of all goodness, righteousness, and truth — 10 testing what is pleasing to the Lord.

Why is it important not to look for light from within but from Jesus?

Paul argued that if a Christian had the light of Christ in him, he or she would exhibit the fruit of the light. This is a unique expression to Paul, but it is not the only time he mentioned fruit in the context of changed behavior. He spoke of the Spirit as producing the fruit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

A life changed by Christ has three strong characteristics. First, Paul said that a Christian living in the light would produce goodness. Goodness is a quality of God Himself (Pss. 73:1; 118:1,29). In Paul’s earlier summary of salvation, he explained that salvation would produce good works in the life of a believer (Eph. 2:10). Second, Paul said the fruit of the light consists of righteousness. This was already produced in the believer as part of the new self that is created at salvation (Eph. 4:24), so that as believers walk in the light, they express the righteousness that God has already given them as a gift (Rom. 5:17). As believers continue to walk in the light, their behavior is transformed from unrighteousness to righteous conduct. Third, the fruit of the light also includes truth. Because believers experience the truth at salvation, that truth emanates like light from their lives. (See Eph. 4:15.)

How then are Christians to live out the changes that have been brought into their lives at conversion? Paul answered that question, encouraging the Ephesians to do a self-examination of their lives. Testing is a present participle, meaning a constant process of self-examination of the fruit of one’s life. The word used here had the dual idea of testing and approving, such as one might do with precious metals such as silver or gold (Prov. 17:3; 27:21). Paul told the Romans that when God renewed their minds, they would be able to test and approve what the Lord’s will was (Rom. 12:2).

The goal of testing our lives is not to find failure but to find success. We are to find a life that is pleasing to the Lord. But what pleases Him?
Certainly it pleases Him when those who are now in the light begin to walk in that light.

**VERSES 11-14**

Summarizing the previous verses, Paul encouraged Christians not to participate in the fruitless works of darkness. While light produces fruitful things such as goodness, righteousness, and truth (v. 9), darkness produces fruitless works. These are things that are unbeneficial, unproductive, and barren. Hiding from darkness does not drive it away. Only light will drive the darkness away.

Instead of participating in the works of darkness, the Christian should expose those works. This is the result of light penetrating darkness. When light arrives it inherently exposes the darkness. The word for expose can also be translated as “rebuke” or “convict,” and that is the purpose of exposing the deeds of darkness. The Christian must not participate in the darkness but rather expose it to bring conviction and correction in the life of the one who has embraced those deeds of darkness.

This verse seems odd in the face of a society filled with talk shows that expose every deed of darkness and news magazines that glory in the most sordid personal details of a celebrity’s life. Paparazzi follow the famous to find the latest bit of smut that can increase viewership, increase readership, or serve as click bait on the computer. Reiterating the message of Ephesians 5:3, Paul reminded his readers that it is shameful to speak of such deeds of darkness. This was a term that Jewish writers used as the opposite of virtue.

Though Paul encouraged Christians not to speak of shameful things, this does not mean God looks the other way and does not see them. When evil deeds are exposed by the light, then all things become visible. Just talking about sin will not bring about the intended result. The darkness of sin must be exposed by the light of the gospel. The only way to expose the darkness is to let the light shine.

To emphasize his discussion about Christians’ illuminating their darkened world, Paul included in verse 14 a quotation from several passages put together (Isa. 9:2; 26:19; 40:1; 51:17; 52:1; 60:1). It is possible that this was an early baptismal hymn that emphasized the resurrection qualities of new birth in Christ. The emphasis of the hymn was that they had risen from their dead way of life (Eph. 2:1) to new life in Christ, where He began to shine on them. Believers humbly expose sin in the world through their actions and deeds, but only Christ has the power to wake them from the dead.

What happens when people attempt to expose sin apart from the convicting power of Christ?
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

PLAY: As the group arrives, hand each person a slip of paper and ask them to write the name of one celebrity. Keep the names hidden, and fold up their slips of paper. Then place all of them in a hat or bag. Once most have gathered, lead the group to play Celebrity Charades. Create teams. In this game, you’ll try to get your team to guess which celebrity you are by imitating them. One at a time, invite a representative from each team to draw a slip of paper. Give them thirty seconds to imitate the celebrity on the list, alternating between each team. The team who gets the most correct answers is the winner.

ASK: It’s often said that imitation is the highest form of flattery. Why is this true, and what are some of the characteristics in other people that you most often try to imitate?

TRANSITION: While it can be tempting to imitate famous people who model various characteristics we respect—such as generosity, compassion, hospitality, or leadership—there’s only One who is worth imitating, and that person is Jesus Christ. In the text we’ll look at today, Paul taught that believers are to imitate Christ by demonstrating His love and character.

SAY: Display Pack Item 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus) and using the information in Understand the Context (PSG, p. 92), set this passage in the context of the greater Letter to the Ephesians. Briefly explain the importance of redemption and grace as the motivation for why we’re to walk in a worthy manner as imitators of Jesus Christ.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Ephesians 5:1-2, while the group listens for the one characteristic that’s essential for anyone who strives to imitate God.

DISCUSS: Lead a discussion of what it looks like to imitate God. Make a list on the board of different character traits people mention, supporting each one with a biblical text if possible.

SAY: The apostle Paul challenged believers to be imitators of God. This is not a command to be taken lightly; rather, it’s to be the lifelong pursuit of those who walk in the new life described in Ephesians 4. It’s how those who are His “dearly loved children” (v. 1) respond to Him.

ASK: How do we remind ourselves each day that we are “dearly loved children” of God? Why must we first understand who we are in Christ before we can strive to be like Him?

EXPLAIN: Emphasize the importance of knowing who we are in Christ in order to obey everything else Paul commands. Use the information under Verse 1 (PSG, p. 93) for support.

ASK: As we read verses 1-2, we discovered the most important trait God calls us to model after Him—love. What characterizes the love of God? From the PSG (p. 94): Does walking in love define what it means to be an imitator of God? Explain.

SUMMARIZE: Throughout the New Testament, both from the example of Jesus and the writings of others, it’s evident that love is a defining character trait of God. Therefore, it’s to be a defining trait of His people. As Jesus modeled for us, this love is sacrificial in nature. We love others and give our lives for them because that’s what Jesus has done for us.
TRANSITION: Having established the foundation for a life that imitates God, Paul next reminded His readers that children of God are to separate themselves from ungodly behavior.

READ: As you read aloud Ephesians 5:3-7, pause after each behavior or trait mentioned that is to be avoided by God’s people and write it on the board.

ASK: What conclusions about God’s people can we draw from this list? What are the dangers of these behaviors, and why does God not tolerate these behaviors or traits in the lives of His people? Create teams of two or three people to discuss these questions. Call on one representative from each team to summarize their thoughts.

SAY: This list isn’t exhaustive, rather it highlights broad categories of behavior that stand in direct contrast to the love, holiness, and righteousness God expects His people to display.

GUIDE: Distribute copies of Pack Item 10 (Handout: Ephesians and Colossians) and read Colossians 3:12-17 to remind the group of the positive traits Christians are to clothe themselves with instead. Use the handout to note other characteristics that believers should display to the world.

ASK: We will either follow Jesus’ example or mimic the behavior of those who don’t follow Him. How can partnerships (business, social, recreational) impact a person’s spiritual life? (PSG, p. 96)

TRANSITION: Paul challenged his readers to live as light in a dark world, producing acts that are pleasing to God and that expose ungodly actions.

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Ephesians 5:8-14. Encourage the group to underline words and phrases that describe walking in the light.

DISCUSS: Light is a common image used throughout the New Testament to describe both the effect of Christ in a person’s life and the effect of the believer in the world. Call on pe-enlisted volunteers to read Matthew 5:14-16; John 8:12; John 12:35; and Colossians 1:9-14. Ask: What additional insight do these verses give into what it means to walk in the light of Christ?

ASK: How do believers serve as light in the world? What is the relationship between walking in love (v. 2) and walking as children of light (v. 8)? (PSG, p. 97)

HIGHLIGHT: Read aloud the final paragraph beginning “Christ calls us to live as light in a dark world ...” on page 98 of the PSG.

MEMORIZE: Encourage the group to memorize Ephesians 5:1-2. Remind them that being an imitator of God means we take great care to isolate ourselves from behaviors that contradict who we are in Him, and we illuminate His love and truth in a dark world.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Read the summary statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 99). Spend the rest of your time together discussing the second question (PSG, p. 99): In what ways can your small group spur one another toward living a godly lifestyle in the midst of a fallen world?

PRAY: Close in prayer, asking God to help you be people who imitate Christ by demonstrating His love and character to a watching world.
PRACTICE

- Reach out to group members who were not present on Sunday. Invite them to share any prayer requests and ministry concerns. Give a summary of the session and encourage them to study the passage on their own, using their PSG.

- Personally reflect on the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 99): Has the darkness of this world lulled you into a spiritual slumber from which you need to awaken? Ask God to examine your life and to help you be more aware of opportunities to be light. Also email this question set to your entire group and encourage them to reflect on it this week.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace the Focus Attention activity, read the paragraph on page 91 of the PSG. Lead the group to create a list of different kinds of walks (examples: slow, fast, confident, defeated, etc.). Ask: What does a person's walk reveal about him or her?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the Ephesians 5:1-2 discussion, ask a pre-enlisted volunteer to share a brief example of a time when someone loved them in a sacrificial and selfless manner that helped them see the love of Jesus.

- To add a visual to your discussion of Ephesians 5:3-7, do the following activity: Bring a jar of oil (canola, vegetable, sunflower, etc.), and place it on a table in front of the group. Remove the lid. Fill three plastic cups partially full of water, and add a different color of food coloring to each cup. Slowly drip a teaspoonful of the colored waters into the jar of oil. As the jar fills with water bubbles, discuss what it’s like to live set apart from the world. Ask: What do you find most challenging about being called to this new life?

- For further discussion of Ephesians 5:3-7, ask: In which area of your life (business, social, recreational) is it hardest for you to imitate Christ and isolate yourself from the world? Share with the person sitting next to you.

- To add to your discussion of Ephesians 5:8-14 (and 5:1-14 as a whole), complete the Bible Skill activity found on page 94 of the PSG.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Brainstorm together the first question set (PSG, p. 99): List actions of love that you could show to a neighbor—actions that echo those Jesus Himself might take. What one action from your list will you take this week? Guide the group to leave today with an actionable step you will take together. As a follow-up to the last session, give another volunteer the opportunity to share the story of his or her life before and after Christ.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

To close your group time, play the song “In the Light,” by dc Talk. Encourage group members to listen for the tension of walking in the light that the song captures so well.
Walking Wisely

Believers are to walk wisely, depending on the Holy Spirit for direction.

EPHESIANS 5:15-21

MEMORY VERSE: EPHESIANS 5:18

READ Ephesians 5:15-21, First Thoughts (p. 114), and Understand the Context (p. 114). As you read, reflect on how much (or how little) you think about the Holy Spirit, compared to the attention you give the other two Persons of the Trinity.

STUDY Ephesians 4:17-32, using Explore the Text on pages 115–119. Spend time reviewing the Key Doctrine (Holy Spirit) on page 103 of the PSG. Look up the other verses related to the Holy Spirit in the Bible Skill section (PSG, p. 105). For more study helps, consult the Explore the Bible Adult Commentary, found in both print and digital format at LifeWay.com.

PLAN the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 120–121). Tailor the plans for your group using More Ideas (p. 122) and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Consider how to implement the Suggested Music Idea (p. 122).

GAIN insights from the weekly podcast on Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/ExploreTheBible).

GATHER the following items: ☐ Personal Study Guides. Prepare to display the following Pack Item: ☐ PACK ITEM 4 (Poster: Ephesians 2: Old and New). Make copies of: ☐ PACK ITEM 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark); and ☐ PACK ITEM 13 (Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians).
**FIRST THOUGHTS**

If you were traveling in an unknown remote area and could select only one form of navigational help, which would you choose? Would you prefer a map, a GPS device, or an experienced guide who had frequently traveled that area and was thoroughly acquainted with it? The wise choice would be a personal guide who possessed complete understanding to reveal the best path for you.

(In PSG, p 100) **Who or what do you consult when planning a trip? How do you know this is a trustworthy source?**

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**UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT**

**EPHESIANS 5:15-21**

Paul made a contrast in this passage between those who are drunk on alcohol and those who are filled with the Holy Spirit. This is not the only time in the Bible this comparison is made. On the day of Pentecost, some thought that Peter and the other followers of Jesus were drunk even though it was morning (Acts 2:13-15). In the Old Testament, when Hannah went to the house of God to pray for a child, Eli the priest thought that she was drunk because he saw her mouth moving but he heard no words (1 Sam. 1:13).

The Bible warns against drunkenness. Some of the physical symptoms mentioned in Scripture are: staggering (Ps. 107:27), vomiting (Isa. 19:14), and hallucinations (Prov. 23:33). A much more serious side effect of drunkenness was that it deadened a person’s sensitivity to God (Isa. 5:11-12). Caution against the use of alcohol was given because of the effects of drunkenness.

Some of those mentioned as drunk in the Bible include Noah (Gen. 9:21), Lot (Gen. 19:33), Nabal (1 Sam. 25:36), Uriah the Hittite (2 Sam. 11:13), King Elah of Israel (1 Kings 16:9) and Ben-hadad (1 Kings 20:16). In each of these cases misfortune fell upon them either in their drunken state or shortly after they recuperated. Therefore, the Bible clearly prohibits drunkenness throughout its pages (Lev. 10:9; Deut. 21:20; Prov. 23:29-35; 1 Cor. 5:11; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:18). Being filled with wine brought negative consequences, but being filled with the Spirit brought the opposite.

The Holy Spirit came upon the early church believers in Acts 2:1-4. This was the initial outpouring of God’s Spirit upon believers. Peter and the other believers were later described as being filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:8,31). When God initially poured out His Spirit upon the Gentiles, they were filled with the Spirit in a similar fashion as the believers on the day of Pentecost (Acts 10:47). The church had entered a new covenant with God through Jesus’ blood, and they had a new relationship with God through the indwelling Spirit.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

BE WISE (EPH. 5:15-17)

VERSE 15
After contrasting light and darkness (Eph. 5:6-14), Paul shifted to a contrast of wisdom and folly. He provided a solemn encouragement to believers to pay careful attention to how they lived. The word translated pay attention is the Greek word for see. Paul combined this word with a word that meant “careful,” “accurately,” or “carefully.” This was the same word used to describe the care that a judge would take in making an investigation. Paul was encouraging deep introspection of one’s life to make sure it reflected the changes God had made in the salvation experience. We are to reflect on the way we live.

Paul encouraged his readers to walk not as unwise people but as wise.
Walking in wisdom was a central theme of Proverbs (Prov. 1:7). The foolish person lived recklessly, flaunting his foolishness and associating with those who were living foolishly. He despised the wisdom of the Lord. However, the wise person made wisdom his diligent pursuit (Prov. 2:1-5).

How could a person obtain such wisdom? Proverbs stated that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7). Certainly wisdom for living begins with a proper relationship with the Lord through faith in Christ. James wrote that whoever lacked wisdom should ask the Lord for it (Jas. 1:5). In other words, wisdom is a gift of God given to those in relationship with the Lord and willing to ask for it. Furthermore, Paul taught that all the treasures of wisdom are found in the Lord Jesus Christ (Col. 2:3). A believer does not have to live the foolish life but can live a life based on the wisdom of the Lord. As Paul stated in Colossians, Christians should “act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time” (Col. 4:5).

Why would wisdom only be found in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ?

VERSE 16
Wise living is really making the most of the time. The older translation, redeeming the time, is a proper translation of the Greek used in the verse. Paul used the word that meant “to purchase,” “to buy,” or “to redeem.” Though the idea of purchasing time is not a common theme in Scripture, it does occur in Daniel 2:8, where Nebuchadnezzar accused his advisors of trying to buy time to figure out his dream since they did not know its interpretation. Though not associated with time, Paul used the verb also in Galatians, where he described redemption from the law. He said Christ “redeemed us from the curse of the law” (Gal. 3:13). Rather than gaining time as in Daniel, the emphasis here was to set someone free from what
held him or her back. This is probably the emphasis of Paul when it comes to making the most of the time. Instead of allowing time to be wasted or used for evil, we are to use time for good purposes.

The reason for the need to redeem the time is that the days are evil. Typical Jews in Paul’s day divided time into the present evil age and the age to come. They saw the current days as tainted by the fall of man. For that reason, they were living in an evil age. Two Greek words were available to Paul as he spoke of time. He could have used one that referred to chronological time or one that referred to an opportune time. He used the latter one in this passage. He was looking for the time when the Messiah would come and ultimately begin a new era of time where everything was redeemed by His hand. Until that time believers were to make the most of every opportunity they had rather than getting swept into the darkness that surrounded them (Eph. 5:6-8).

**What are practical ways you can redeem the time?**

**VERSE 17**

17 So don’t be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.

**VERSE 17**

One of the ways we can make the most of every opportunity is to understand how God would want us to live in a world that is fallen and dominated by evil. Paul again encouraged the Ephesians not to be foolish. This is a different word than the one used for the unwise in verse 15. It appears seventy-four times in Proverbs to contrast the fool with the one who walks in the ways of the Lord. Proverbs describes the foolish person as lazy (24:30), loose-tongued (18:6-7); quick-tempered (14:29), and reckless (14:16), among other things.

By focusing on the small, everyday decisions about how to live, Christians will place themselves in positions to discern His will about the big, major decisions of life.

Rather than being foolish, Paul encouraged believers to understand what the Lord’s will is. Often, people think of the Lord’s will in terms of the major decisions of life such as one’s college, career, or lifetime spouse. This is not what Paul intended in this verse. The will of God included the things God had already revealed in His Word about how believers were to live. Since Lord consistently refers to Jesus in Ephesians, it is probable that Paul was encouraging the Ephesians to live according to the teachings of Christ. Like in Romans, he was encouraging them to pattern their lives after Jesus in every area, not merely the unknown areas of life (Rom. 8:29). By focusing on the small, everyday decisions about how to live, Christians will place themselves in positions to discern His will about the big, major decisions of life.
BE FILLED (EPH. 5:18)

VERSE 18
When talking about living wisely, Paul encouraged Christians not to get drunk with wine. Though drunkenness was commonly a part of Roman culture and pagan worship, it was never accepted in Scripture. Believers need to be under the control of the Holy Spirit, not under the influence of alcohol.

The influence of alcohol led to reckless living. This term had the basic idea of “wastefulness.” This negative characteristic stood in contrast to those who were making the most of the time (Eph. 5:16). It was the term used of the prodigal son when he took his early inheritance and squandered it on reckless excess (Luke 15:13). Drunkenness wastes time and opportunity. It leads to other sins because it causes a person to lose control.

Instead of being drunk with wine, Paul commanded believers to be filled by the Spirit. This is not only for a select few who want to go deeper with God or those who have achieved some higher degree of spirituality. This is a command for every believer. On the day of Pentecost, when believers were filled with the Spirit, others thought they were drunk with wine (Acts 2:13–15). Just as alcohol influences the behavior of the drunk person, the Holy Spirit influences the behavior of those who are filled by Him.

The infinitive is a present, passive infinitive, meaning that it is something continual (“keep on being filled”) and something God does, not something we achieve or merit. As a believer cooperates and surrenders to God, He fills him with His Spirit.

Verse 18 makes the contrast started in verse 15, where Paul compared the wise person with the unwise person. An unwise person yields himself to alcohol, and it consumes his behavior, causing him to lose restraint and live recklessly. A wise person yields himself to God, and He fills him with the Holy Spirit, producing wise behavior and strong character.

(In PSG, p. 105) How does being controlled by the Holy Spirit compare to and contrast to being controlled by alcohol?

BE GENUINE (EPH. 5:19-21)

VERSE 19
A result of the filling of the Holy Spirit is praise and thanksgiving directed to the Lord. The phrase speaking to one another implies the idea of communicating and expressing love for the Lord. Believers filled with the Spirit of God address one another with praise to God. Paul mentioned three types of songs. The first is psalms. Psalms referred to the songs collected in the Old Testament Book of Psalms. These were meant to be sung together in public worship. Other expressions of worship in song were called hymns. This traditionally was a festive lyric ascribed to the praise of
a hero or god, but in this case the hymn would have been directed toward God and Jesus. Those filled with the Spirit also worshiped with *spiritual songs*. These could have been spontaneous expressions of praise from the heart (1 Cor. 14:15). Spirit-filled believers do not battle over the types of songs, for there is plenty of room for diverse types and styles. The point of the singing songs of praise is not the musical style but the One who is the object of our worship.

The Spirit-filled believer is to be *singing and making music* in his or her *heart to the Lord*. The worship of Spirit-filled believers has both a horizontal and vertical dimension. Some songs were sung to one another to edify and build each other up in the faith. Other songs were sung to the Lord as a prayer or direct expression of praise. Those who include only one of these foci in worship miss out on one of the important dimensions of worship.

**What practical value are songs that are sung to each other about the Lord? What is the value of singing songs directly in praise to the Lord?**

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**A grumbling spirit is not in concert with the Holy Spirit’s filling.**

**VERSE 20**

In addition to singing, the Spirit-filled believer also is *giving thanks*. Gratitude was a constant emphasis of Paul’s writing (1 Cor. 14:16-17; Phil. 4:6-7; Col. 3:16-17; 2 Thess. 1:3; 2:13). A grumbling spirit is not in concert with the Holy Spirit’s filling. Instead of complaining, those filled with the Spirit are thankful to God for what He has done in their lives. Since Paul already stated that God was the source of every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3), he expected that those who were filled with the Holy Spirit would have gratitude in their hearts. Therefore, he said that Spirit-filled people thanked God *always for everything*. The *Father* had sent His Son *Jesus Christ*, and in His *name* believers experience blessings they do not deserve and cannot earn.

Both singing and giving thanks are characteristics of a Spirit-filled life. They both are the natural outgrowth of being under the direction of the Holy Spirit. When He fills people, praise and thanksgiving are two of the natural outgrowths. One more is mentioned in the next verse.
VERSE 21

Paul emphasized that Spirit-filled believers will be *submitting to one another*. The word *submit* occurs in Paul’s writing twenty-three times, and it usually denotes subordination to those who are worthy of respect. This could include civil authorities, parents, church leaders, and masters of slaves. This verse may be what leads to Paul’s discussion of the family in the following verses (Eph. 5:22–6:9). Submission is not a natural tendency of the flesh, but it is an important action that keeps order in the church and in society. Though today the English term *submit* is often mentioned in a pejorative way and is seen as a weakness, it is a valued characteristic in the kingdom of God. It was also valued in both the military and political life of the Roman Empire. Without mutual submission, chaos would reign.

**Those who are subject to Jesus Christ do not find it difficult to submit themselves to one another.**

This mutual submission of believers to another is done in the fear of Christ. It is not done horizontally, as one believer is forced to submit to another, but it is done vertically. As people made right with God and filled with the Spirit, they place themselves in the proper relationship to one another. Those who are subject to Jesus Christ do not find it difficult to submit themselves to one another. In Ephesians 5:2, Paul had told the Ephesians, “walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.” If Christ had willingly submitted Himself to them for their salvation, how could they not willingly submit themselves to one another as the reverenced Christ?

To live wisely, a person needs to fear Christ. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7). The fear of the Lord is the basis of loving God with the heart, soul, and mind (Deut. 6:2-9). The fear of the Lord provides protection (Prov. 14:26), wisdom (Prov. 15:33), life (Prov. 19:23), wealth and honor (Prov. 22:4). It is the basic building block of church and society. Where the fear of the Lord is absent, disorder and chaos reign, whether it is in society, in the church, or in the family. In Christ, all pride and all feelings of superiority vanish. As the Spirit of Christ fills each believer, their self-assertive spirit should be replaced by a desire to work in harmony with others.

**What is the opposite of submission to one another?**
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: Direct the group to read the scenario (PSG, p. 100). Then, explain that the left side of your meeting room is “Map,” the right side is “Experienced Guide,” and the middle is “GPS.” On your signal, instruct the group to move to whichever place represents their choice for navigation. Give volunteers an opportunity to explain their response.

EXPLAIN: Our desire for an experienced guide increases with the “degree of difficulty” of what we’re attempting. If you’re driving to your sister’s new house for Thanksgiving, you’re probably OK with the GPS. But if you’re scaling Mt. Everest, you want the best guide available.

ASK: How would you rate the “degree of difficulty” in living a wise life?

TRANSITION: Today’s Scripture passage highlights the difficulty of living wisely, but it also assures us that we have constant access to the greatest Guide we could hope for!

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 5:15-17. Write the word WISE in large letters on the board or a sheet of paper. Call for descriptors of a wise person.

ASK: What would you include on this list, based solely on what you see in verses 15-17?

EXPLAIN: Remark how we often use the same words to describe what to do with time as we do for what to do with money (examples: spend, save, invest, waste, squander). Why do you think that is? Highlight from the PSG (p. 102): Time is actually more valuable because of its scarcity.

ASK: Describe the difference between spending your time and investing your time. (PSG, p. 103)

MINI-LECTURE: State: As much as we talk about discovering God’s will, there are surprisingly few times in the New Testament in which “God’s will” is explicitly stated. We’re to be sanctified and are to avoid sexual immorality (1 Thess. 4:3). We’re to give thanks in everything (1 Thess. 5:18). We’re to do good so that foolish people will be silenced (1 Pet. 2:15).

ASK: Since the Bible doesn’t give us a detailed list of things that are within God’s will, how do we obey verse 17? Allow for discussion, and remind the group of the opening illustration about the need for a guide.

TRANSITION: We aren’t guided by a written checklist of what is and isn’t the will of God. As we will see next, we’re guided by the Holy Spirit, which is so much better!

READ: Choose a volunteer to read Ephesians 5:18. Point out that this verse is the memory verse for this session. Distribute copies of Pack Item 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark) to anyone who does not yet have one.

EMPHASIZE: Paul’s intent was not to make a point about the use of alcohol. Rather, his point was to contrast being controlled by a substance—any substance—and being controlled by the Holy Spirit.
DISCUSS: How does being controlled by the Holy Spirit compare to and contrast to being controlled by alcohol? (PSG, p. 105) Distribute copies of Pack Item 13 (Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians) to review how the Holy Spirit helps us through His guidance and control.

EMPHASIZE: Call on a volunteer to read the paragraph in the PSG that begins, “The Scripture speaks clearly about the Spirit’s nature and ministry. … (p. 104). Highlight the information about the present passive imperative tense of the verb “filled,” and suggest that an accurate translation would be “You are being filled!”

ASK: How are you obeying this command to let the Holy Spirit fill you every day? If it’s up to Him to fill us, why are we given the imperative?

TRANSITION: Notice that verse 18 ends with a colon. This tells us that the verses that follow are going to explain what it means to “be filled with the Spirit.” So let’s look at that now.

READ: Guide the group to read Ephesians 5:19-21 and summarize Paul’s point. Invite volunteers to share their summary.

ASK: Someone might read verse 19 and wonder how it applies to them if they aren’t musically inclined. How would you respond to this? If not addressed, point out the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the experience of singing. Note that even those who don’t consider themselves musical can still make music in their hearts to the Lord.

READ: Lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 105). You may choose for the group to work in pairs, with each pair looking up one of the verses. Call for volunteers to share insights gained.

ASK: Considering verse 20, how are we to give thanks “always for everything”? What about negative things? Point out that God doesn’t expect us to be happy about tragedy but to recognize God’s grace and comfort in the midst of those circumstances. Emphasize that this unnatural response is evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Highlight the key points under In My Context (PSG, p. 108). Lead the group to reflect on one way they will follow the command to be filled by the Spirit this week.

APPLY: Considering the three broad areas of verses 19-21 (encouraging one another, expressing gratitude to God, submitting to one another), challenge the group to analyze their relationships and attitudes toward other believers in your community.

CHALLENGE: Lead the group to discuss the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 108): What attitudes in your life at the present could be used as “proof of ownership” by the Holy Spirit? What adjustments do you need to make to your attitude?

PRAY: Lead in prayer, asking God to help all of you be controlled by His Holy Spirit this week.
PRACTICE

- Send an email to group members challenging them to invite someone new to the group time this week. Encourage them to use social media as a contact.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)
To replace the Focus Attention activity, invite the group to share their biggest “Siri® Fail” moments, when their smartphones misheard them or responded in an unexpected way. You can also do an Internet search for “Siri Fails” and print off amusing screen caps.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To introduce the discussion about the Holy Spirit, lead group members to share different ways the Holy Spirit has been explained to them. Acknowledge that He is often the least understood member of the Trinity.
- To further discuss Ephesians 5:19, lead the group to flip through their Bibles and read aloud verses from Psalms they have highlighted or that have encouraged them at different times.
- To support the discussion of Ephesians 5:19-21 and giving thanks, review Pack Item 4 (Poster: Ephesians 2: Old and New). Lead the group to discuss how reminders of who we were before Christ can help us remain thankful.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)
Encourage each person in the group to name one area of their lives they need to fully allow the Holy Spirit to control. As the leader, write down what each person says, and when you close in prayer, pray for each person by name and that they would surrender that area of their lives this week.

If others have expressed interest in previous sessions, allow a volunteer to share the story of his or her life before and after Christ. (See Session 9.)

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA
Play the song “Holy Spirit,” performed by Francesca Battistelli or Kari Jobe. You could play it at the beginning of your session to set the stage for your discussion. For a more traditional alternative, close by singing the hymn “Spirit of the Living God,” by Daniel Iverson.
Walking as Family
Believers are to demonstrate God’s love in their family relationships.

EPHESIANS 5:22–6:4
MEMORY VERSES: EPHESIANS 6:2-3

READ Ephesians 5:22–6:9, First Thoughts (p. 124), and Understand the Context (p. 124). As you read, ask God to open your eyes to the truths in His Word.

STUDY Ephesians 5:22–6:4, using Explore the Text on pages 125–129. Review PACK ITEM 1 (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys), noting the significance that Paul visited Ephesus in both his second and third missionary journeys.

PLAN the group time, using Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 130–131) and More Ideas (p. 132). Keep in mind the main idea of this week’s study: Believers are to demonstrate God’s love in their family relationships. Consult QuickSource for additional questions that you can use in leading the discussion and an Object Lesson idea for this week’s study.

GROW with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).

GATHER the following items: □ Personal Study Guides; □ Enlist a couple to share about the role of submission of wives and Christlike love of husbands in their marriage; and □ Note cards and pens for each group member. Make copies of the following Pack Item (if needed): □ PACK ITEM 12 (Handout: Unity in the New Testament).
FIRST THOUGHTS

Frequently, a relationship is described in these terms: “Well, it’s complicated.” What does that really mean? It could indicate the absence of a genuinely committed relationship. On the other hand, a truly loving relationship isn’t always easy; it may indeed be complicated. Nowhere do we need this clarification more than our closest family relationships—between a husband and a wife, and between parents and children.

(In PSG, p. 109) What factors make a marriage relationship complicated? How do these factors impact other family relationships?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 5:22–6:9

Like Jewish society, Greco-Roman political leaders understood the household to be the basic building block of the state. Their philosophers wrote heavily about the relationships of authority and subordination in the home. They believed that order in the home created an ordered society. The Roman Empire was a paternal society, with the rights of the man elevated far above that of the women, children, and slaves. Yet, women in the first century were gaining greater legal and domestic independence than in previous centuries. Children and slaves had few rights, and the authority of the husband over them was near absolute. Slaves were considered part of the household, and even their religious preferences were dictated by the patriarch of the family. Romans were offended when their slaves converted to Judaism or Christianity.

The prevailing type of marriage according to both Jews and Romans was monogamous, though standards of faithfulness to the marriage bed differed greatly in Roman society. In Roman culture, prostitution and adultery were common occurrences.

Against this backdrop of the social institution of the family in the Roman Empire, Paul wrote Ephesians 5:22–6:4. The apostle divided his discussion into the three categories of husband and wife, parent and child, and master and slave. What Paul wrote about each of these categories of relationships was starkly different than the norms of his society. In fact, he centered his entire discussion of family relationships to the gospel of Jesus Christ.
EXPLAIN THE TEXT

WIVES (EPH. 5:22-24)

VERSES 22-23
Paul began his instructions to the family by encouraging wives to submit to their husbands. The verb does not appear in the Greek text of verse 22 but is assumed from the previous verse, where all Christians were told to submit to one another in the fear of Christ (v. 21). Like in the previous verse, this submission was voluntary and based on the proper ordering of an institution, in this case, the family. It did not imply that husbands were more capable or important than wives or that all women should submit to men outside of the marriage relationship. It simply created an environment in the home where order and respect were present.

Paul encouraged wives to submit as to the Lord. He was not implying that the relationship of the wife to her husband is directly comparable to her relationship with her Lord, but rather it is a duty she assumes not for her husband alone but for her Lord. This parallels Colossians 3:18, which says, “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord.” She submits because it is an act of service to her Lord.

(In PSG, p. 112) How has modern society misunderstood this command for wives to submit to husbands?

Submission in the home reflects the relationship between Jesus and His church. Paul stated that the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. The metaphor of the head has been oft-discussed, and most commentators either view it as carrying some sense of leadership and authority or as the source and point of origin from which women came. According to the first view, the role of the husband was ordained by God for servant leadership in the home because God created man first and entrusted him with those responsibilities. It had nothing to do with capabilities or worth. The second views the head imagery as referring to the man as predating the woman in creation with no attempt to assign any leadership or authority.

Paul showed how marriage is a beautiful picture of the gospel.

Maybe both attempts are missing the imagery. The idea of the head and the body is not that they are in competition with one another but that they are part of the same body, functioning in different roles. In a stroke of the pen, Paul showed how marriage is a beautiful picture of the gospel. He said that Jesus is the Savior of the body. He did not say that the husband was the Savior of the wife. Jesus is the Savior of them both.
What does Christ’s leadership in the church say about the husband’s leadership in the home?

VERSE 24
Paul reminded his readers of the relationship between Christ and His church. He stated that the church submits to Christ. What would a church look like without its voluntary submission to Christ? That church would be in chaos. Each member would be seeking his own way and doing what he pleased. A healthy church is a church where its members submit to Christ. This is the same way for marriage. Paul reminded wives that they should submit to their husbands in everything.

Why is submission not a blanket call to obedience?

VERSE 24
24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives are to submit to their husbands in everything.

VERSE 25-27
25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. 26 He did this to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless.

HUSBANDS (EPH. 5:25-33)

VERSES 25-27
Turning from the responsibilities of the wives, Paul commanded husbands to love their wives. In Roman society, it was recognized that wives had obligations to their husbands, but not husbands to their wives. Christianity was revolutionary in that it submitted the characteristic of godly love into the home. Instead of using the words for love that meant sexual love or friendship love, Paul used the word that described the love of God for His children. Marriage is a call for husbands to die to self and serve their wives.

Marriage is a call for husbands to die to self and serve their wives.

Paul again showed that marriage was a picture of the gospel. He encouraged husbands to love their wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. The sacrificial death of Jesus is a picture of the attitude and actions that a husband should take as the leader of the home. Marriage is a call for husbands to die to self and serve their wives. How could anyone not submit to one another in this type of setting?

The purpose of Christ’s death was to make the church holy. The word literally meant “to set apart,” and the purpose of Jesus’ death was to set...
apart a people for Himself. Jesus longed for His bride as a husband longs for his wife, and Jesus sacrificed Himself to make that bride all that she should be in His eyes. Jesus set apart His bride by washing of water by the word. By the word of the gospel believers were transformed from their old way of life to the bride of Christ. Then they were baptized with water, demonstrating an inward transformation. By virtue of Christ’s love, He cleansed and sanctified the believer to make them His own bride. Paul expected a sacrificial attitude of husbands toward their wives.

Jesus sacrificed for His bride to cleanse them, but He also did so to present the church to himself in splendor. The word splendor was often used of clothing, so the idea is that Jesus’ desire is to present His bride to Himself in eternity as a beautiful bride adorned for the wedding. He listed several characteristics of that transformed bride. She would be without spot or wrinkle or anything like that. Incredibly, Christ will present a bride who has no stains of sin and no blemishes of any kind. He will have made all things new when it comes to His bride, and she will be a glorious treasure to Him. Husbands who receive their wives in this context will sacrifice themselves to help their wives display the characteristics of Christ.

Marriage is more than a living arrangement and more than a means to fulfillment.

VERSES 28-30
Returning to his idea of the husband as the head of the body, Paul declared that husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. Jesus loves the church not as if it were His body but because it is His body. Husbands and wives are connected as a head is connected to the body. They are incomplete without each other. Thus the husband who loves his wife in turn loves himself. Marriage is more than a living arrangement and more than a means to fulfillment. Marriage creates one new person out of two. Marriage unites the husband and the wife in a way that makes the head and the body want to submit to one another (Eph. 5:21). The wife is not a piece of property or a trophy won in conquest. She is part of the man, and he is part of her.

Why is the body analogy important for one’s view of the permanency of marriage?

A wise person takes care of his body. He hates not his own flesh because the head needs a healthy body. Likewise, the husband cannot merely decide he no longer cares for his bride. Rather, he provides and cares for his wife. Provides carried the idea of nourishing and providing food. The word cares originally had the idea of providing heat, as a mother bird would brood over her nest. (See Deut. 22:6.) The two terms together emphasize the nurturing and cherishing of one’s spouse. Once again, Paul held Christ as the standard

VERSES 28-30
28 In the same way, husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hates his own flesh but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, 30 since we are members of his body.
of how to care for the bride. He had nourished and cherished His church, and in doing so provided a standard for all husbands to follow.

The reason Jesus cared for His church is that all Christians are members of his body. Earlier in Ephesians Paul had spoken about the church as a body and Christ as the head (Eph. 1:22,23; 4:12,16). The two had become one flesh as the husband and wife become one flesh (Gen. 2:24). For the husband not to nourish and cherish his wife would be like neglecting his own flesh or like Christ neglecting His church.

The husband and wife are one flesh in every sense—spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and physically.

VERSES 31-33

31 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. 32 This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 To sum up, each one of you is to love his wife as himself, and the wife is to respect her husband.

Paul quoted Genesis 2:24 to show how two separate individuals become one flesh. It is the divine mystery of marriage. Prior to this verse, Adam had recognized Eve as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh (Gen. 2:23). She was not an addition to him but part of him. The husband leaves behind his old life with father and mother and enters a new relationship where he is joined to his wife. This had the literal sense of bonding or gluing two objects together. They are bonded together in a one flesh relationship. Obviously this refers to the sexual, physical union of a man and a woman, an act reserved only for the marriage relationship. However, in light of all that is said above this verse, it is more than a mere sexual union. The husband and wife are one flesh in every sense—spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and physically. It must be that way as they are one body.

The relationship between Christ and His church was a great mystery. Paul had already used this term four times in Ephesians, and it always described something that was hidden for a time only to be revealed by God in its due time (Eph. 1:9; 3:3,4,9). He would use it again in Ephesians 6:19, and each of the five times it related to the gospel message. The mystery was the hidden plan of God that came to fulfillment in Christ. He called the mystery profound. Paul understood that the original marriage relationship (Gen. 2:24) modeled Christ’s forthcoming union with the church as His body. Thus, Paul’s description of the relationship between a husband and wife presented God’s ideal for all marriages that would point to the relationship between the bride of Christ and Christ Himself.

Paul concluded his portrayal of Christian marriage by summarizing the responsibilities of the husband and wife. First, Paul encouraged the husband to love his wife as himself. He encouraged the wife to respect her husband. This may shed light on what Paul meant by submission. He did not intend to mean the laying aside of all rights and opinions. By submission he meant a healthy respect for the husband and his spiritual leadership in the home.
CHILDREN (EPH. 6:1-3)

VERSES 1-3

The one word that described a child’s relationship with parents was the word obey. This obedience is not based on the parents’ worthiness but on the children’s relationship in the Lord. Obedience to the parents is right, meaning that it is a part of God’s divine pattern for children.

Paul quoted the fifth commandment, honor your father and mother (Ex. 20:12), and identified it as the first commandment with a promise. But Exodus 20:6 also carries a promise that God would show faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commands. Since that is the case, what did Paul mean by first? Paul probably meant that it was the first commandment of importance to children. They learned obedience to their parents, and in doing so it emphasized the importance of obedience to God.

The promise was that it may go well with you. Paul quoted here from Deuteronomy 5:16. Children who obeyed their parents would have lives that were fulfilled and ordered according to God’s commands. He also promised that you may have a long life in the land. This was tied to the occupation of the promised land. This promise was directly tied to the old covenant, and it would be wrong to deduce that all obedient children will live a long life. Some link the longevity of life with eternal life, but others believe that this promise was only part of the previous covenant.

How can the obedience of children to their parents result in a more fulfilling life?

PARENTS (EPH. 6:4)

VERSE 4

Just as children had the responsibility to obey, parents had the responsibility not to stir up anger in their children. Specifically, this was addressed to the fathers because ultimately discipline reflected their leadership in the home. Inconsistency in discipline and lack of love and nurturing for children can stir up this anger. Instead, parents should raise their children in the training and instruction of the Lord. The first word emphasized a more formal setting of education, while the second term emphasized verbal counsel and exhortation to proper behavior in a less formal setting. Parents have the responsibility of educating their children formally and informally in the ways of the Lord.

What are ways that ineffective parenting stirs up anger in children?

VERSES 1-3

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, because this is right.
2 Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, 3 so that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life in the land.

VERSE 4

4 Fathers, don’t stir up anger in your children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: As the group arrives, direct them to read the paragraph on page 109 of the PSG. After most have arrived, ask: What are some specific ways that your family has influenced you, for better or for worse? What factors make a marriage relationship complicated? How do these factors impact other family relationships? (PSG, p. 109) Why do you think family is important to God? Record responses on a board.

SUMMARIZE: Review key points of Understand the Context in the PSG (p. 110). Emphasize the impact our new life in Christ is to have on our family relationships, which will be the focus of today’s discussion.

TRANSITION: Through today’s reading and discussion we’ll be reminded that believers are to demonstrate God’s love in their family relationships. Paul gave several examples of what Christ-centered familial love should look like in action.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Ephesians 5:22-24, while the group records Paul’s key command for wives when they hear it read.

GUIDE: Submission is a polarizing word for many people in our culture, yet it’s a central command of the Christian faith. (See Eph. 5:21.) What are some ways submission is misunderstood by people today? How has this warped people’s perceptions of a wife’s relationship to her husband?

EXPLAIN: Although submission has taken on negative connotations over time, it’s a concept ultimately rooted in love and respect—a mutual yielding to one another. Write the word “submission” on a board. Read the paragraph beginning “The mandate for all Christian wives ...” on page 111 of the PSG.

ASK: Call for responses to the questions on page 112 of the PSG.

READ: Invite another volunteer to read Ephesians 5:25-33, while the group records the main command Paul gave to husbands when they hear it read.

EMPHASIZE: Paul appealed to the example of Christ to illustrate how a husband should act in marriage (PSG, p. 113). Critical to understanding Paul’s teaching in this text is understanding that marriage is designed to be a reflection of the gospel. Call on pre-enlisted volunteers to present a summary of the following verses that describe Jesus’ love for us: Isaiah 53:2-12; John 3:16-18; Philippians 2:1-11; 1 John 4:7-11. Write the word “love” on a board. Read aloud the following statement from the PSG (p. 113): Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is the barometer for a husband’s love for his wife.

SHARE: Invite a pre-enlisted couple to share about how these two commands from Paul (submission of wives and Christlike love of husbands) are lived out in their marriage. Encourage them to share reasons these commands are challenging to obey and ways their marriage has been strengthened when both are living in obedience to these commands.
ASK: How does a marriage demonstrate a couple’s understanding of Christ’s love and the gospel? (PSG, p. 114) For those who aren’t married, how can you apply the principles of submission and Christlike love to your own relationships?

TRANSITION: After detailing the mutual submission and love of a godly marriage, Paul shifted his focus to another family relationship—children and parents.

READ: As you read aloud Ephesians 6:1-3, direct the group to listen for the two commands Paul gave to children. Add these commands to the board.

SUMMARIZE: To help distinguish between the command to obey parents (v. 1) and the command to honor them (v. 2), summarize the commentary from verses 1-3 (pp. 114–115).

ASK: What did it mean to obey your parents when you were a child? Which of those actions would be inappropriate as an adult? (PSG, p. 115) What are some of the best ways we can honor our parents as their adult children? How does respecting one’s parents reflect the gospel story we’re part of?

STATE: Showing respect and honor to one’s parents matters so much to God that He made it one of His Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:12). When we show love and respect to our parents, no matter our age, we glorify God and the design for family He created.

EMPHASIZE: Recall Pack Item 12 (Handout: Unity in the New Testament). State: Unity within the body of believers begins—and is often most difficult—in our own families. Especially in strained or difficult relationships, we must rely on the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Ephesians 6:4. Encourage the group to add to their list on the board the final command, given to parents (fathers in particular).

ASK: How would you articulate the connection between the command to children (vv. 1-3) and the command to parents (v. 4)? Highlight from the PSG (pp. 115–116): A family that demonstrates love in their relationships is a family in which everyone seeks to fulfill what God expects them to do within that family.

ASK: In what ways will Christian parenting be different from secular parenting? (PSG, p. 116)

CONCLUDE: Mutual submission—love and respect for one another—is at the heart of all family relationships. As Paul frequently pointed out, the only way one can live in obedience to the commands Paul set forth in this passage is through the power and presence of Jesus at work in your own life.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Review the statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 117). Distribute note cards and instruct each person to record the statement(s) that apply to them. Encourage them to carry these cards as reminders of how God desires for them to relate to their families.

CHALLENGE: Discuss the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 117): As a group, discuss how the group can encourage godly marriages in your community. What actions do you need to take as an individual to encourage godly marriages?

PRAY: Close in prayer, thanking God that He has ordained the family as the foundational institution of society. Pray all will glorify Him in their familial roles by loving and respecting others.
PRACTICE

- Contact any group members who were absent from this session. Let them know the study was about family relationships, and ask if there is anything you can pray with them about.

- Text or email the group during the week. Remind them of the high standards to which God calls His people—a standard rooted in loving others the way Christ loves us. Encourage them to continue learning the memory verse (Eph. 6:2-3), and to be sure and attend next week for the final week of the Ephesians study.

- Spend time personally reflecting on the following question from In My Context (PSG, p. 117): What do you need to do to honor your parents at this point in your life?

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

For an alternative Focus Attention option, spend time as a group making a list of famous families (think: TV, movies, history). Record responses on the board. Guide the group to identify one or two words that capture the essence of that family. An example might be “the Ricardos (from I Love Lucy)—humor and love.”

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To aid in your discussion of Ephesians 5:22-33, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill (PSG, p. 112) activity in pairs: Reflect on Ephesians 5:22-33, focusing on the imagery. What does the imagery communicate about the importance of marriage? What does it indicate about the permanency of marriage? How can a person safeguard a marriage from outside threats?

- For further application of Ephesians 6:1-3, encourage the group to memorize Ephesians 6:2-3 this week. Remind the group that even if their parents are no longer alive, they can encourage friends, grandchildren, and others in their lives to obey this important command.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Review the commands given by Paul that were recorded on the board. Lead the group to suggest ways these commands could be lived out this week. Direct each person to select at least two actions listed and commit to doing those actions this week.

Invite another volunteer to share his or her story of life before and after Christ. (See Session 9.)

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Play the song “Broken Vessels,” by Hillsong United, or sing “Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound,” by John Newton. Remind the group that we are all broken people, trying to be in relationship with other broken people, but through Jesus our relationships are made whole.
Walking to Battle

God provides believers with all the resources needed to live Christlike lives.

Ephesians 6:10-20

MEMORY VERSE: Ephesians 6:11

READ Ephesians 6:10-20, First Thoughts (p. 134), and Understand the Context (pp. 134–135). As you read, reflect on what you’ve learned from the Book of Ephesians this quarter.

STUDY Ephesians 6:10-20, using Explore the Text on pages 135–139. Spend time reviewing the Key Doctrine (The Scriptures). For more study helps, consult the Explore the Bible Adult Commentary, found in both print and digital format at LifeWay.com.

PLAN group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 140–141), More Ideas (p. 142), and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Add variety to your plans for your group in this session by using at least one idea from More Ideas.

GAIN insights from the weekly podcast on Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/ExploreTheBible).

GATHER the following items: □ Personal Study Guides; and □ Several pieces of sports equipment that all go with the same sport and one item that doesn’t. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: □ PACK ITEM 2 (Outline of Ephesians); and have □ PACK ITEM 5 (Poster: The Armor of God) prepared to display, but don’t show it to your group until after they’ve read Ephesians 6:14-17.

Make copies of: □ PACK ITEM 11 (Handout: Armor in Ephesians).
FIRST THOUGHTS

We admire people who take on a challenge. The Bible is full of people who met challenges with courage and confidence. Elijah faced the prophets of Baal. David stood his ground in front of Goliath. Esther risked death to reveal Haman’s plot. Peter defied the order to stop preaching the gospel. Each of these people put their confidence in God and not solely in their own abilities. God prepared them and provided the resources for these defining moments, and He continues to do so for His followers today.

(In PSG, p. 118) What are some of the reasons people run from a battle? Why would someone run to it?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 6:10-20

The Roman military not only conquered the territories held by Rome, they safeguarded the liberties of its citizens in cities across the empire. The military was composed only of soldiers who were citizens. Many of these soldiers enlisted in order to gain citizenship to the Roman Empire. When not involved in war, the Roman army performed many civic duties, such as construction, maintenance, or other peacekeeping duties.

The main foot-soldier had two weapons at his disposal. Each soldier had a lance, which was over three-feet long and had an iron point. He also carried a sword for hand-to-hand combat. The soldier would often throw the lance and then draw his sword for combat. These offensive weapons were supplemented with a defensive weapon: a wooden shield. The shield was oval and covered in leather. It protected the soldier during combat, and the wooden nature of the shield extinguished flaming arrows that were directed at the soldier.

The clothing of the soldier served various functions. During combat the soldier wore a metal helmet, protecting this crucial part of the body from the lance or the sword. A breastplate covered the heart and was usually made of metal over a kilt of leather. Sometimes the shoulder area and lower legs were protected by metal armor, and the shoes were often spiked sandals that allowed traction for the soldier as he advanced in battle.

Though Romans soldiers were generally regarded negatively by the Jews (Luke 3:14), Jesus once expressed amazement at a Roman soldier’s faith (Matt. 8:5-13). A soldier was among the first Gentiles to receive the Holy Spirit in Caesarea (Acts 10). Paul was often imprisoned under their watch, and he preached the gospel to those who held him captive (Phil. 1:13). As Paul thought of the battle between the forces of God and the forces of evil...
at work in his life, he used the imagery of a soldier’s army to help Christians prepare for the battle.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

AWARE (EPH. 6:10-13)

VERSE 10
Paul had previously spoken of the old self and the new self (Eph. 4:17-24). Though the old self died when Christ came to live in a Christian’s life, the believer still had to put off the effects of the old self. Similarly, Satan was defeated by Christ on the cross and victory is secured in our lives when we come to know Jesus. However, that does not mean that the devil will quit fighting battles. He is defeated through the death and resurrection of Christ, but believers must still be aware of his evil ways of deceit.

Because of this ongoing battle, Paul encouraged the Ephesians to be strengthened by the Lord. As we yield to the Lord, He supplies his vast strength to give us victory in battle. This same expression was used in Ephesians 1:19-20 to describe the divine power that brought about Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation. The bad news is that we have spiritual battles to face on earth. The good news is that we can be strengthened by the Lord’s mighty power. If He can raise Christ from the dead, He can protect us in battle.

VERSES 11-12
The way to stand in the power of the Lord is to put on the full armor of God. In addition to relying upon their relationship with the Lord, Christians are to appropriate the divine gifts He has given us for the battle. The Christian soldier needed the full armor of God to ensure protection from head to foot. This included all of the armor, both that which was defensive and that which was offensive. Failure to place any of these pieces of armor on the Christian would leave the spiritual soldier exposed to the attack of the enemy.

The method of the enemy’s attack is described in verse 11 as schemes. The English word methods is derived from this Greek word for schemes. It implied subtle, strategic tactics. Paul had previously used the word in Ephesians 4:14, where he spoke of the subtle attempt of the false prophets to lead people astray. No doubt Satan was behind those attempts, and in this passage the devil is responsible for strategic attempts to defeat Christians. The devil is evil and also intelligent. He carefully strategizes ways to attack the people of God to minimize their influence and make them feel the battle is lost, even if it has been conquered by Christ in His death and resurrection.

Christians often think their biggest struggles are with other people, and so they lash out at them or battle against them. Paul reminded the Ephesians that their battle was not against flesh and blood. This was a way of emphasizing that the battle was not with people. Certainly Satan has used people to carry out his schemes, but the ultimate battle is not with those people.

VERSES 10-12

10 Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and by his vast strength. 11 Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

The real battle is with *rulers, authorities, cosmic powers of this darkness,* and *evil spiritual forces in the heavens.* These are demonic forces under the direction of Satan. He uses them to scheme against believers and cause defeat in their lives. The battle is not against Satan alone but against various powerful evil forces of varying rank, authority, and capabilities. Satan is cunning, well-organized, and well-equipped to inflict damage upon those spiritual soldiers not prepared for the battle.

**Why is it important to recognize that the battle is not between us and other people?**

**VERSE 13**

13 For this reason take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand.

**VERSES 14-15**

14 Stand, therefore, with truth like a belt around your waist, righteousness like armor on your chest, and your feet sandaled with readiness for the gospel of peace.

**VERSE 13**

In light of verse 12, Paul urged believers to **take up the full armor of God.** This is now the second time in this section he has encouraged such action (v. 11). The hope of the believer is not to outsmart the enemy or to overpower him. The hope of the believer comes in appropriating the armor God has made available to the soldier for the battle. In verse 11 Paul used a word meaning “be clothed in,” and here he used a word that meant to “take up or assume.” Believers are to clothe themselves in spiritual armor and then appropriate it into their lives for battle.

Having clothed himself with armor, the spiritual soldier must **resist** the enemy. This was a compound word that meant to **stand against.** It does not imply standing there and taking his assault but offering resistance to his assault. The **evil day** probably is representative of the day of that attack, not some future experience of evil assault. The secret to withstanding the assault of the devil is in the preparation. **Having prepared everything,** the Christian soldier would now **stand** in the mighty power of the Lord and resist the enemy’s attack.

**PREPARED (EPH. 6:14-17)**

**VERSES 14-15**

Having encouraged preparation in verse 13, Paul began to list the pieces of armor that would prepare the Christian for battle. He has twice said to put on the whole armor, and in this section he detailed it piece-by-piece. The first piece of armor he encouraged the Christian to wear was **truth like a belt.** The belt surrounded the waist and held the armor in place. A tightly fitted belt indicated the soldier was prepared for action, but a slackened belt indicated he was off duty. The **truth** which holds every piece of armor in place is the gospel. (See Eph. 1:13; 4:15.) Perhaps Paul borrowed this imagery from Isaiah 11:5, “Righteousness will be a belt around his hips; faithfulness will be a belt around his waist.” This Old Testament passage was a reference to the coming Davidic king who would be characterized by truth. Jesus was the One who came with truth as His belt. Since the
devil is a liar and operates through lies (John 8:44), the belt of truth is the foundational piece of armor in the attack.

Paul also encouraged Christian soldiers to put on righteousness like armor on your chest. This was a reference to the breastplate, which covered the chest from the neck to the thighs. Again, Paul drew his imagery from the Old Testament, where Isaiah 59:17 stated: “He put on righteousness as body armor.” In this passage it was the Lord who girded Himself for battle and fought the decisive battle of victory. Now in Ephesians, Paul encouraged the soldier to put on that same armor piece that led to victory. By putting on righteousness, the soldier does not give an inch or a foothold to the devil in the battle. Righteous living closes doors to temptation and the schemes of the devil. But that righteous living is made available only by the gift of righteousness given through Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:17).

Paul also encouraged believers to have their feet sandaled with readiness for the gospel of peace. Jewish historian Josephus described soldiers’ shoes as thickly studded with sharp nails. Good shoes were vital to the success of an army because they traveled many miles from battle to battle. They also traveled tough terrain at times. The shoes represented the readiness or preparedness of the soldier. But what was the soldier prepared to do? He was prepared to announce the gospel of peace. He was speaking victory over the battle, announcing that it had already been won through the gospel. Here Paul may have been recalling the words of Isaiah 52:7, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the herald, who proclaims peace, who brings news of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” In the midst of warfare, the soldier needs the reminder that peace has already come through the gospel. The battle will not last forever.

VERSE 16

Until this point Paul has only emphasized articles of clothing, but in verse 16 he encouraged the soldier to take up the shield of faith. Paul had repeatedly emphasized the necessity of exercising one’s faith in God and Jesus in Ephesians (Eph. 1:13,15,19; 2:8; 3:12; 6:23). This was not the content of one’s belief but belief and trust in the Lord. In the Old Testament, God is spoken of as a shield around His people (Pss. 18:30; 28:7; Prov. 30:5). Paul was encouraging the Ephesians to put their faith in the Lord as a shield.

To go into battle without faith leaves the believer exposed to fear, worry, or panic.

Greek had two words for shield. One was a small shield that covered only minimal parts of the body, and the other was a full-body shield. This is the one used here. Faith in God covered the entire soldier as he went into battle. To go into battle without faith leaves the believer exposed to fear, worry, or panic. The shield was made of wood covered in leather, and flaming arrows would have embedded themselves in the shield, extinguishing their fire. In this way Paul said that the shield of faith would extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.
**VERSE 17**

17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit—which is the word of God.

Paul urged the spiritual soldier to put on the **helmet of salvation**. Like the breastplate of righteousness, this piece of armor was also mentioned in Isaiah 59:17. Roman helmets were made of iron or bronze with cheek guards and an inside lining of sponge to make the weight tolerable. In Isaiah 59:17 it was the mighty warrior Yahweh who wore the helmet. He alone achieved victory over the devil through the death of Christ on the cross. Here, spiritual warriors are required to wear a helmet as well. It is not a different helmet but the helmet of salvation achieved for them by Jesus.

The final weapon mentioned in the spiritual warrior’s armor is the **sword of the Spirit**. In Isaiah 11:4, the Messiah was portrayed as the One who struck the ruthless with a scepter from his mouth. In this vein, Paul described the sword of the Spirit as the **word of God**. As Jesus used the words of Scripture to drive back the assault of His enemy during the temptations in the wilderness (Matt. 4:4,7,10), we also have the authority to stand against Satan’s evil designs by standing in the power of God’s Word.

How have you used God’s Word as an offensive weapon against Satan?

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**VERSE 18**

18 Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints.

In addition to armor and weapons, the soldier has at his disposal field support. The first level of field support is prayer. Paul told soldiers everywhere to **pray at all times**. The wise soldier sharpens his prayer life before the battle even arrives. Both preparation and engagement in battle require prayer. Prayer must be offered in the **Spirit**. The form of the Greek word emphasizes the means by which prayer is offered. The Spirit is with the person praying, inspires the person to pray, guides the person in what to pray, and energizes him or her to keep praying. People can pray in the flesh, but it is ineffective. Effective prayer must be offered in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul used different words for prayer. Believers should offer **prayer**, a general word for prayer, and make **request**, which is the more specific word for intercession. When the battle is fierce, all kinds of prayer should be offered to the Lord. Prayer requires **perseverance**. Those who are fighting the battle are depending upon the prayers of others, and prayer warriors cannot fall asleep at the task.

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**FIELD SUPPORT** *(EPH. 6:18-20)*

The Spirit is with the person praying, inspires the person to pray, guides the person in what to pray, and energizes him or her to keep praying.
Paul was engaged in battle at that very moment, imprisoned for preaching the gospel. He humbly asked that the believers pray also for him. He did not ask them to pray for his release, but that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel. Paul did not pray for deliverance from the battle but success in the midst of battle. Prayer should be centered upon the advance of the gospel more than the safety of those who are advancing it with their words and lives. Like the apostles before him (Acts 4:29), Paul did not shrink in fear but desired to speak with confidence about the power of Jesus to save those who had imprisoned him. His battle was not with the soldiers who held him (Eph. 6:12) but with the schemes of the devil that attempted to silence him with chains.

Why should our prayers, even in a battle, be gospel-focused?

In Paul’s battle, he was an ambassador in chains. He had once before used the idea of ambassador to describe his role in taking the gospel to the lost. He stated, “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ’s behalf: ‘Be reconciled to God’” (2 Cor. 5:20). Paul’s passion to take the gospel to the lost drips from this verse. An ambassador lives in a foreign land but represents his home country. Paul saw himself as a stranger in the lands he traveled to take the gospel, and he desired to deliver the message of his home kingdom—the kingdom of God. Though he was an ambassador, he was in battle. He was in chains for preaching the gospel.

The heat of battle is not the time to shrink in fear and silence the gospel message.

For a second time (v. 20), Paul asked for prayer that he would be able to speak about the gospel as he should. The pronoun it is a reference back to the gospel mentioned in the verse 19. Paul prayed that God would grant him boldness to speak of Jesus even in the battle. The heat of battle is not the time to shrink in fear and silence the gospel message. The gospel had brought victory to his life, and in the battle he wanted others to hear of victory in Christ.
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: As the group arrives, call attention to several pieces of sports equipment (or pictures of them) associated with the same sport, such as football pads, cleats, and a helmet. Also include something in the display that has nothing to do with football, such as a gardening trowel. Ask: Based on these items, what sport am I getting ready to play? Which item doesn’t belong?

EXPLAIN: It’s important that every player who gets out on the field is not only protected but is prepared to play his or her specific position. And sometimes what you don’t carry with you is every bit as important as what you do. No one would bring a gardening trowel to the line of scrimmage.

REVIEW: Discuss key points from Understand the Context (pp. 134–135; PSG, p. 119). Refer to Pack Item 2 (Outline of Ephesians) to review what you’ve studied this quarter.

TRANSITION: As we study, pay attention to all the resources God provides to believers in order for them to live Christlike lives.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Ephesians 6:10-13. Point out that verse 11 is the memory verse for this session. Lead the group in reciting the verse.

EXPLAIN: Notice that Paul doesn’t say “strengthen yourselves in the Lord,” but “be strengthened by the Lord” (v. 10). We can’t win spiritual battles in our own strength but only in the strength the Lord gives us. (Refer to paragraph under Verse 10, PSG, p. 120.)

ASK: Why does it matter that believers in Christ clearly understand that their walk in Him includes facing spiritual conflict? What dangers exist if the believer fails to recognize the possibility of spiritual battles? (PSG, p. 122)

STATE: Call attention to verse 12 and what it says about who we are and are not fighting against. Using the information in this leader guide (p. 135), emphasize that the point isn’t to try to figure out the distinctions between spirit beings but that we aren’t fighting other human beings.

ASK: Why do you think it matters that we take up the whole armor of God? Draw attention back to the sports equipment display from the Focus Attention step, and discuss the consequences of not being fully protected in a football game.

TRANSITION: Notice the word “prepared” in verse 13. That leads us to our next point: Once you’re aware, you must be prepared.

READ: Direct the group to read silently Ephesians 6:14-17, guiding them to form a mental picture of each piece of armor as they read about it. After they have formed their mental picture, display Pack Item 5 (Poster: The Armor of God). Instruct the group to identify and label what each piece of armor spiritually represents (examples: the belt equals truth; the helmet equals salvation).
GUIDE: Direct the group’s attention to Pack Item 11 (Handout: Armor in Ephesians). Lead the group to discuss the functions of each piece of armor and why Paul compared each piece to the specific quality of Christian character that he did. Call on volunteers to share about a time in their lives when they most felt the reality of spiritual warfare. Encourage them to share how they were able to achieve victory in those circumstances. Refer to other Scriptures that describe spiritual warfare, such as 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 and 1 Peter 5:8-9. Emphasize that every passage that deals with spiritual warfare assures us of victory.

ASK: What might keep a believer from utilizing the armor God provides for fighting spiritual battles? What responsibility do we have in preparing for spiritual battle? (PSG, p. 124)

TRANSITION: It might surprise you that Paul didn’t list prayer as part of the armor of God. But this doesn’t mean prayer isn’t important in spiritual warfare.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Ephesians 6:18-20. Direct the group to be listening for the answers to the “Five W’s” about prayer: who, what, when, where, and why.

DISCUSS: For whom does Paul say to pray? When do we pray? What do we pray for? How should we pray? Why do we pray?

EXPLAIN: Being strengthened in the Lord depends on what God does for us and not what we’re able to do for ourselves. In the same way, even our prayers to God are empowered by Him. That’s what it means to pray “in the Spirit” (v. 18). It’s carried out through the power of the Holy Spirit.

DIRECT: Invite the group to take out their smartphones and set an alarm for either 6:18 a.m. or 6:18 p.m. tomorrow. Explain that the alarm serves as a reminder to pray according to Ephesians 6:18—“at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request.” Challenge them to do this not just for a day, but every day this next week.

DISCUSS: Why do you think Paul picked this moment to remind the Ephesians that he was in prison for the sake of the gospel? Suggest it could be that Paul earnestly desired their prayer. But it also served to remind them of the high stakes of spiritual warfare and why prayer is so important.

ASK: How does knowing others are praying help a person face spiritual battles? (PSG, p. 125)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

CHALLENGE: Form pairs of the same gender and direct each pair to review the statements from In My Context (PSG, p. 126). Lead partners to ask each other the questions in the second question set: What spiritual battles are you currently facing? What needs to be “put on” to face these battles?

PRAY: Direct pairs to spend time with one another in prayer. Encourage them to exchange phone numbers if they don’t have each other’s numbers already and commit to texting their partners in the middle of next week to remind them that they’re praying for them.
**PRACTICE**

- Contact any group members who were absent from this session. Let them know a major part of the study was about praying for one another, and ask if there’s anything you can pray with them about.
- Text everyone who attended this session at 6:18 p.m. every day this week to let them know you’re praying for them.
- Send an email or text to all group members, reminding them that you’ll be beginning a new unit of study next week on Numbers and Deuteronomy. This is a great time to invite someone to your small group.

**MORE IDEAS**

**FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)**

To replace the Focus Attention activity, invite the group to introduce themselves by sharing their favorite hobby or recreational activity. (This is especially effective for a group who may have a lot of newcomers.) After hearing about various hobbies and activities, pick a few volunteers and ask them to name what kind of equipment or tools people need to engage in that activity.

**EXPLORE THE TEXT**

- To further emphasize the point that our strength for spiritual warfare is from the Lord, call attention to the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 121). Call on volunteers to look up the verses listed to discover what the Bible says about God as the primary warrior.
- To enhance your discussion of Ephesians 6:14-17, invite a police officer, firefighter, or soldier to bring their protective equipment to your group and walk through the importance of each piece of equipment.
- To enhance the study of Ephesians 6:18-20, trade the names of people in your group with the names of people from another group in your church that also uses Explore the Bible. Lead your group to pray for members of the other group by name, and let them know the other group is doing the same thing for them.

**SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)**

On the board or a large sheet of paper, lead the group to create a list of action points from Ephesians 6:10-20. Ask: *What are some things believers can do in order to “put on the full armor of God” (v. 11)? Which of these can you do this week?*

**SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA**

Play the song “Christ Is Risen,” by Matt Maher, as a reminder that the ultimate victory in spiritual warfare has already been won by Christ. For a more traditional alternative, close by reading the words to the hymn, “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” by Sabine Baring-Gould.
These items are available on the CD-ROM in the *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* as PDFs to create your own handouts or media presentations for your group. Items marked as handouts are also available as reproducible masters on the CD-ROM included in the *Explore the Bible Leader Pack*.

**PACK ITEM 1**

*Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys*

Sessions 1-13

Use the map on page 155 or locate a map in a Bible atlas that shows Paul’s missionary journeys.

**PACK ITEM 2**

*Outline of Ephesians*

Sessions 1-13

Refer to the outline printed on page 12 (PSG, p. 9).
PACK ITEM 3
Poster: The City of Ephesus
Sessions 1, 4, 6, 8, 10
Locate a Bible atlas or Bible dictionary that shows the city of Ephesus during Paul’s lifetime.

PACK ITEM 4
Poster: Ephesians 2: Old and New
Sessions 3, 5, 11
Create a poster that lists characteristics of a life before Christ, as listed in Ephesians 2:1-3 and the characteristics of a new life in Christ, described in Ephesians 2:4-6.

PACK ITEM 5
Poster: The Armor of God
Session 13
Locate a depiction of a first-century soldier’s armor to display.

PACK ITEM 6
Key Verses: Ephesians 2:8-9
Session 3
Create a poster that lists Ephesians 2:8-9: “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast.”

PACK ITEM 7
Handout: Ephesians Time Line
Sessions 2, 8
Locate a study Bible with a time line of the major people and events in Ephesians (from 1400 BC–AD 110). Use it as a reference during this study.

PACK ITEM 8
Handout: Memory Verse Bookmark
Sessions 1-13
Make a list of these suggested memory verses to distribute to your group:
• Ephesians 1:7
• Ephesians 1:18
• Ephesians 2:8-9
• Ephesians 2:14
• Ephesians 3:6
• Ephesians 3:17
• Ephesians 4:1
• Ephesians 4:14-15
• Ephesians 4:23-24
• Ephesians 5:1-2
• Ephesians 5:18
• Ephesians 6:2-3
• Ephesians 6:11

PACK ITEM 9
Handout: Mystery in the New Testament
Session 5
Use a Bible dictionary to create a handout that defines mystery in the New Testament.
Make note of the following Scriptures:

- Mark 4:11
- 1 Corinthians 2:7-8
- Ephesians 1:9
- Ephesians 2:12-13
- Ephesians 3:3-5
- Ephesians 6:19

PACK ITEM 10

Handout: Ephesians and Colossians

Sessions 8,10

Use a Bible dictionary or commentary to create a chart that compares similar themes in Ephesians and Colossians.

PACK ITEM 11

Handout: Armor in Ephesians

Session 13

Use a Bible dictionary or commentary to explain the different parts and purposes of “the full armor of God” (Eph. 6:11,13).

PACK ITEM 12

Handout: Unity in the New Testament

Sessions 4,7,12

Use a Bible dictionary or commentary to create a handout that discusses Christian unity (Rom. 15:5-6; Eph. 4:3-6; Phil. 2:1-2), the root causes of church division (Rom. 15:7; 1 Cor. 3:1-4; Phil. 2:1-4; Jas. 4:1-12), and the role of believers in every generation who bear the responsibility of making unity a reality (Phil. 2:3-4).

PACK ITEM 13

Handout: The Trinity in Ephesians

Sessions 2,6,7,11

Use a Bible dictionary or commentary to create a handout that expounds on the Trinity in Ephesians. List these Scriptures as a guide:

- Ephesians 1:3,7-8,13-14
- Ephesians 1:17
- Ephesians 2:18
- Ephesians 2:22
- Ephesians 3:14-19
- Ephesians 4:4-6
- Ephesians 5:18-21
Ephesians’ Unique Message

By Rodney Reeves

Ephesians reads like a collection of what Paul had written in his other letters. As any Bible with cross references reveals, every verse in Ephesians leads the reader to passages in Paul’s other letters that deal with the same subject. This is especially true since Ephesians is so similar to Colossians. They share the same outline, they develop the same topics in much the same way, and they even have the same instructions regarding Tychicus (nearly verbatim agreement, Eph. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-8). What makes Ephesians unique, however, is the way certain ideas Paul briefly mentioned in other letters are developed more fully in this letter, which was written toward the end of his life. “We may never know for certain the situation that prompted Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. What is apparent, however, is that this letter captures the heart and soul of his gospel ministry, the essence of his Christology and ecclesiology.” Although several topics in Ephesians could be explored, for the purposes of this article, I would like to feature what could be considered the main themes of the letter: the cosmic rule of Christ, how believers reign with Christ, and how believers can overcome evil.

Paul’s Message

Paul wrote about the implications of Christ's resurrection for all creation in Romans 8:18-25. His main focus, however, was on believers and how the resurrection glory of Christ will be revealed in us on the last day—a hope that is not seen but confirmed by the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. That Christ’s resurrection would affect all creation—an ancillary point in Romans—Paul developed in Colossians 1:13-23 and Ephesians 1:11-23. In particular, Paul wanted “the eyes” of the Ephesians’ “heart to be enlightened” to realize the power of Christ’s victory over death, over the malevolent powers “of the air,” and over every named creature of this age and the age to come (Eph. 1:18–2:2). Indeed, Paul used quite a bit of “power talk” wrapped in royal imagery as he tried to get his converts to see the implications of Christ’s resurrection. Christ ascended to God’s throne, was seated at the right hand (an idiom of unquestioned authority), having put all creation “under his feet” (another idiom of royal supremacy), and was installed with the highest name (the King!). Therefore, no power can oppose the Ruler of all things.

On the heels of making these claims regarding Christ’s resurrection power, Paul wrote about how believers share in Christ’s reign (2:1-16; see also Rom. 6:4-14; Col. 2:9-15). Paul made the connection when he described the church as the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23). In other words, since the church is the body of Christ, and since Christ has put all creation under His feet, then the church will reign over all things—even created powers that are hostile to Christ and His kingdom. And what does that look like? Before they were saved,
Paul’s converts were dead in sin—beholden to the ways of the world, to fleshly desires, and to the “spirit” that incites disobedience (2:1-3). But Christ’s resurrection—His victory over sin, death, and all powers that oppose God—is a power that is realized by those who have been saved by grace through faith. Believers are co-regents of Christ’s kingdom, installed by God “in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” because we are His body. This explains how believers live transformed lives; they do the work of God because they are the work of God (vv. 8-10). For Paul, the best evidence of transformed lives was the peace of Christ found in the church. Ethnic strife (what Paul called “the enmity”) between Jews and Gentiles—a wall erected by the law—was abolished through the work of Christ because God has reconciled the whole world, turning enemies into friends (vv. 11-16).

If believers are seated in heavenly places with Christ, having authority over all powers, then what happens in the “real world”—for Christians who still face the reality of living on the earth “below” with the “ruler of the power of the air” (the devil) above us? In Ephesians 4:24, Paul encouraged his converts to put on “the new man,” wearing Christ like a garment. A similar idea appears in Romans 13:12-14, where Paul encouraged the Romans to resist evil by wearing Christ like an “armor of light.” In this way, they would make “no provision for the flesh.” Paul expanded that idea in Ephesians 6:10-17, where he described the “whole armor of God,” relying on imagery in Isaiah 11:5; 49:2; 52:7; and 59:17. By wearing Christ like an armor, the believer does battle against evil powers, both in heavenly places and on earth (Eph. 6:12). Like a bulletproof vest, Christ defends His co-regents from the flaming missiles of the evil one, that is, “the schemes of the devil” (v. 16, see v. 11). And by His Spirit, Christ empowers believers to use God’s Word like a sword through prayer and the proclamation of the gospel (vv. 18-20). In this way, Ephesian believers would “be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might” (v. 10). Christ leaves them neither defenseless nor powerless.

**PAUL’S MOTIVATION**

Why did Paul highlight these ideas in his Letter to the Ephesians? His reason had everything to do with what was going on in Ephesus at the time. Said one writer:

Ephesus was the center of magic, astrology, and the mystery religions, and many converts to Christ in that city were once involved with these religious practices. They believed that their lives were under the influence of cosmic powers. Paul may have written, among other purposes, to alleviate their fears by showing that Christ is sovereign in the cosmos.
One of the seven wonders of the ancient world was in Ephesus, the great Temple of Artemis (also called Diana). The temple had a reputation for trafficking in magic; priests who served sold magical amulets to protect devotees from malevolent powers. Sown into their clothes or worn around their necks and wrists (charm bracelets!), these charms protected parts or zones of the body: head, heart, hands, loins, or feet. According to Luke, when the Ephesians believed Paul’s gospel, they burned all of their magical paraphernalia (Acts 19:18-19). Once Paul left the area, evidently the Ephesians began to question their impulsive response to the gospel. Should they have destroyed their magical protection? Without their amulets, would they be vulnerable to the attacks of the devil and his minions?

This makes Paul’s argument regarding the power of Christ’s resurrection even more poignant. Since Christ put all enemies under His feet (“rule, authority, power, and dominion” were technical words used to refer to the angelic or demonic powers), and since the church is His body, then all powers (angelic and demonic) are—by the power and presence of Christ in us—under our feet, too. Indeed, believers reign with Christ in their victory over every enemy of God: sin, death, the flesh, and the devil. Raised with Christ, a believer wears Christ in His resurrection power like an armor, protecting every zone of his or her body: head (helmet of salvation), heart (breastplate of righteousness), hands (shield of faith), loins (belt of truth), and feet (gospel of peace). So that, no matter what happened to them (even to a man like Paul who was in prison when he wrote this letter, Eph. 6:20), the Ephesian believers should have been inspired to proclaim boldly the good news of Jesus Christ. Indeed, more than for self-defense, Christ put into the hands of the Ephesians the sword of His Spirit—the Word of God—to advance His reign against the forces of darkness in wicked places. The Ephesians had everything they needed to “stand firm” (6:14) in the faith because Christ was raised from the dead and His soldiers reigned with Him—on earth as it is in heaven.

2. Scripture quotes are the writer’s own translation.

This article originally appeared in the Fall 2010 issue of Biblical Illustrator. Rodney Reeves is professor of biblical studies and dean of Redford School of Theology at Southwest Baptist University, Bolivar, Missouri.
I believe in questions. I believe in them because they help us learn. Because they encourage our imagination and our sense of wonder. Because they exercise our creativity. And because asking questions, both to other people and to ourselves, helps us personalize information.

I believe in questions. And I believe in questions when studying the Bible. In the same respect, questions help us dig deeply into the meaning of Scripture. Questions help us meditate on the truth we find there. And questions also help us move our time in God’s Word from being just an educational exercise and into the realm of training in godliness. So it’s good and right, I believe, to ask all kinds of questions when we are studying the Bible. But there is one question we should avoid. It’s a question that is, in fact, dangerous for us to ask:

“What does this passage mean to me?”

Or, if you are leading someone else in Bible study, the question looks like this:

“What does this passage mean to you?”

Why is this a dangerous question to ask? It’s because the question itself implies a level of authority for you or me that we simply don’t have. It supposes that you and I have the right to determine what a passage of Scripture means to us. And what it means to me might not...
be what it means to you, but that’s okay, because each one of us determines the meaning on our own. And so we find ourselves on the slippery slope of relative truth in which we are all living under our own lordship. Of course, when we ask that question to ourselves or to others we might not be intentionally alluding to this, but Rome wasn’t built in a day. Neither is a worldview formed in a moment, but only over the course of time with repeated questions like this.

When we come to the Bible, we must come with an understanding of the Bible’s authority. That it is the truth. And when we see the Bible as authoritative, then the question of “what this passage means to me” becomes irrelevant. To be blunt about it, who cares what the Bible means to me? Who cares what the Bible means to you? I didn’t write it, and neither did you. The question, if the Bible really is God’s authoritative Word, is not what it means to me, but rather what it means period. Because it means what it means what it means.

By way of illustration, let’s say that I have a plate of food that I serve to a group of friends. I might ask all kinds of questions about that food—what does this look like to you? What does it taste like to you? What is the texture? What does it remind you of? All these questions can bring out a deeper appreciation of the dish. But if I asked the question, “What is this plate of food to you?” then it is really just speculation. In the end, it might be an interesting discussion of what different people think it is, but what they think it is doesn’t change what it actually is.

There is a simple change we can make to this question that makes all the difference in the world. It’s just a one word alteration, but with that single change we also change the implication dramatically. We emphasize the authoritative nature of God’s Word. Further, we also emphasize that God’s Word, because it is authoritative, requires a personal response from us. Here’s the change:

“What does this passage mean for you?”

Or,

“What does this passage mean for me?”

Again, just one word. But that one word makes all the difference because with this new question, we are calling ourselves or other people not to decide upon what truth is, but instead to act on the revealed truth. This is a good question. This is the right question. And this is the right posture for us to have when we approach God’s Word. We approach the Bible knowing that this is God’s Word to us, and God’s Word is calling us to respond over and over again. It is a Word for us. For us to respond to. For us to live by. For us to treasure. But not for us to interpret according to our own desires.

This article originally appeared on LifeWay’s Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupsMinistry). Michael Kelley serves as Director of Groups Ministry for LifeWay Christian Resources. He is the author of Wednesdays Were Pretty Normal: A Boy, Cancer, and God; Transformational Discipleship; Boring: Finding an Extraordinary God in an Ordinary Life; and Growing Down: Unlearning the Patterns of Adulthood that Keep Us from Jesus.
When Panicky People Go To Small Groups

By Scarlet Hiltibidal

I had just started taking brain medicine again for my hyperventilations. I’d grown up with anxiety—anxiety that was so crippling at times that it landed me in the hospital as a child and in urgent care as an adult. Anxiety that had led me, during one season, to step out of a small group leadership position because I didn’t feel capable of leading.

So, I was dealing with debilitating panic (again) in this particular season. I found myself (again) in an office with a sound machine, (again) picking up a prescription that would, as I knew from some experience, help me stop panicking. My response to all these anxiety-related “agains” was to become very hermit-like and refuse to tell people about my situation.

I felt ashamed. Leading a small group again was the furthest thing from my mind. Instead, I just attended one and mostly kept my mouth shut.

But, here’s the beautiful thing. When I finally opened my mouth and shared my struggle, I wasn’t mocked or shunned and kicked out of the group. I was given grace and love. A moment of vulnerability that could have caused yet another run of panic instead brought peace. It was special and powerful.

If you are a small group leader who struggles with anxiety or panic disorders, or if you lead people who do (chances are this is always the case), here are three things I’d encourage you to keep in mind as you lead your group.

LEAD WITH VULNERABILITY

A former pastor of mine spoke a lot about “going below the line of shame.” He would encourage our congregation, as they met together in small groups throughout the week, to share, not just surface struggles, but to go below that line we all have—the line that makes us question, If I share this, will I still be accepted? Will I still be loved?

The reason he encouraged this in our church body was because he knew the truth and beauty of a biblical community centered around applying the gospel and living in the light. “If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).
This is completely transformational—believers exposing and turning from their sin in biblical community. We should share our sins, our struggles, and the “agains” that are trying to crush our hearts.

When I was walking through that season of medicating my panic and trying to hide it, I finally decided to share. It felt impossible to even let the words leave my mouth, because I assumed I was more broken than everyone else in the room.

But my small group surprised me by not being surprised. Instead, they were kind and loving, and my willingness to share about this struggle that embarrassed me prompted others to share theirs.

If you are the group leader and anxiety is an issue in your life, sharing it really sets the tone for your group to look to you, not as a “perfect” or “together” leader, but as a co-laborer who understands struggle, just like they do.

**LEAD WITH HOPE**

In the past, I’ve been part of unhealthy small groups that were basically clusters of people who would open in prayer, complain for fifteen minutes each, and say, “See you next week!”

It is healthy to share struggles within the context of a small group, but it is vital that the tone of the group be one of gospel hope and encouragement. As a small group leader, you can be intentional about steering your group members away from negativity and toward hope.

If they battle anxiety, your group can spend some time sharing verses of comfort and hope. I would also encourage group leaders to make it a point to always end your time together reflecting on the finished work of Jesus.

This is what our lives are about, and this is the way we should lead one another—to share our burdens but always look to the cross.

**LEAD BY LISTENING**

I think it’s really important for a group leader to be open and share struggles as a way of encouraging other members of the group to do the same, but a group leader should definitely not be the only person talking.

Once you’ve shared your own struggle and how you apply the gospel to it, listen to the other members of your group. Let them process their feelings and questions, but don’t just leave it there. Don’t simply wrap it up with a “let’s pray.” In a small group setting, you have this beautiful opportunity to take sin and struggles of all kinds to the Bible. You have this guide that we hide in our hearts. Share the worries. Then, share the Word.

Don’t be afraid to confess your struggles, and always, always, always, point your own self and your people to the hope of the world, our Jesus, who died to defeat everything we’re afraid of.

This article originally appeared on LifeWay’s Groups ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupsMinistry). Scarlet Hiltibidal is the author of Afraid of All the Things and He Numbered the Pores on My Face. She also writes a regular column for ParentLife magazine.
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**Session 1**  God Leads  
*Numbers 9:15-23*

**Session 2**  God Judges  
*Numbers 13:31–14:10*

**Session 3**  God Requires  
*Numbers 20:1-13*

**Session 4**  God Saves  
*Matthew 1:18-25; Numbers 21:6-9*

**Session 5**  God Calls  
*Numbers 22:22-35*

**Session 6**  God Commissions  
*Numbers 27:12-23*

**Session 7**  God Expects  
*Numbers 32:20-32*

**Session 8**  Valued  
*Deuteronomy 5:17; 19:4-13*

**Session 9**  Honored  
*Deuteronomy 4:1-9*

**Session 10**  Loved  
*Deuteronomy 6:1-13*

**Session 11**  Revealed  
*Deuteronomy 18:15-22*

**Session 12**  Chosen  
*Deuteronomy 30:1-10,19-20*

**Session 13**  Promised  
*Deuteronomy 32:48-52; 34:4-7*
Paul’s Second and Third Journeys

- **City**: Various ancient cities and towns mentioned in the map.
- **Site of the Seven Churches of Asia**: Possible locations in the region of Asia Minor.
- **Mountain peak**: High points indicated on the map.
- **Roads**: Various routes and pathways.
- **Pass**: Key points or transitions between different routes.

**ACTS 15:36–19:14**

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