



Christ
Church
W4

The Book of Ephesians

A Study Guide

'because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.'

– Ephesians 2:4-5



It's all about
LOVE...

(Image by Sofia Smith)

Introduction

'Writer and poet Eugene Peterson tells the story of his four-year-old grandson hopping up into his lap to hear a troll story. "Tell me a story, Grandpa," he begged, "and put me in it!" That is what Paul is doing in Ephesians, telling the ultimate story—God's story—and putting some Gentile believers—and us—in it (1:13-14; 2:13).'

*Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart,
How to Read the Bible Book by Book, p.347*

Ephesians is widely understood to be a 'circular letter,' written in A.D. 61-62 by Paul for the benefit of Christians in a number of places, not just Ephesus, but in particular Gentile (non-Jewish) churches. Whereas in other letters in the New Testament, we see Paul arguing his case, or developing his thought using logic, not to mention passion(!), here he expresses himself through prayerful meditation. It is the 'pervasive atmosphere of prayer that is its most distinctive feature' (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, p.412). Paul opens the letter not with a thanksgiving section but with a prayer of blessing (1:1-14). And it's a blessing that literally pours out to the church. In the original language (Greek), verses 1-14 of chapter 1 are one single sentence(!) The sense is that we can never come to the end of what God has done for us, or what the implications are for us, and that God wants us to experience his love and life more fully.

Chapters 1-3 tell of how God has made peace with us through his son, Jesus Christ, and how Christ makes peace between people. God is a great reconciler. The church is called to be

reconciled to God, to one another, and to live a reconciled life in the world—the focus of chapters 4-6. It's a battle but we're on the winning side (3:10; 6:10-18).

It's All About LOVE

One huge prayer. One mandate for mission. Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus tells the ultimate story. It reminds us not only of God's power, glory, wisdom and goodness—things we might expect of God—but of the extravagant overflow of God's love for us, a love we couldn't have expected, because we don't deserve it, and a love we couldn't have known without Jesus's death for us on the cross. As Paul says in chapter 2, 'because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.'

God is in the business of bringing the dead to life. Of loving us up from the grave.

Musicals are having a moment in the sun right now. Most of them contain songs about love, but the kind of love most musicals sing about is always bigger than the couple singing. It overcomes obstacles. It fights for something. A love that is worth singing about is always bigger than the people in love and reaches beyond them. It kills it to be put under a microscope. People don't go to Glastonbury or Wembley stadium to hear Adele sing about endorphins or brain chemistry, they go to hear her sing something deep and true, vast and soul-full, a kind of love that transcends us all.

In Ephesians 3:16-19 the Apostle Paul prays that you, the reader or hearer, would be strengthened with power by God's Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ would dwell in your hearts through faith, and that you, being rooted and established in love, would have power together with all the Lord's people to grasp the width, length, height and depth of Christ's love, to know this love that surpasses knowledge.

Paul was single, Paul had killed people in the name of religion, and Paul was also, at this point, in jail (see 3:1). He might not seem like an obvious candidate to speak about love. But it does show that God's love has no conditions, that God's love can change hearts and lives, and that God's love reaches behind bars.

As you read the book and hear it preached, pay attention to Paul's prayers for the Ephesians. This is not dry academic writing. This is the bubbling over of a man's heart changed by the experience of the love of God. Paul kneels as he prays (3:14) because as he prays for others to grasp this love, he's overwhelmed by it himself. It's as if words run out for him as tries to help the Ephesians grasp what he knows is on offer.

Do you know a love like that? Do you know that God loves you like that?

How does that shape your prayers? How will it shape our lives...

Ephesians 3:14-17a God Who Lives In You

Chapters 1-3 flesh out the beliefs behind the practices which Paul talks about in chapters 4-6. The big reveal is that 'through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus' (3:6). This, and Christ's resurrection from the dead, is what Paul preaches wherever he goes.

'Simply calling on us to try a little harder, to be sorry and see if we can do better next time, would fail to address the root of the problem. What is needed is a change of inner nature, not external performance.' (Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church*).

Take a look over chapters 1-3 and read them together if you have time.

Discussion

- What is the gospel as you understand it?
- How do you understand the gospel in light of what Paul writes here? What has Jesus's death accomplished?
- Which verse(s) in these first three chapters of Ephesians do you think express(es) the gospel best and why?
- Inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan must have been genuine news, and we assume it was very good news, for Gentiles in Paul's time. What were the implications for the

Gentiles then? What are the implications in our day? Is this still news? How?

- What were the implications of this gospel for the Jews? What can we learn from this?

Read 3:14-17a.

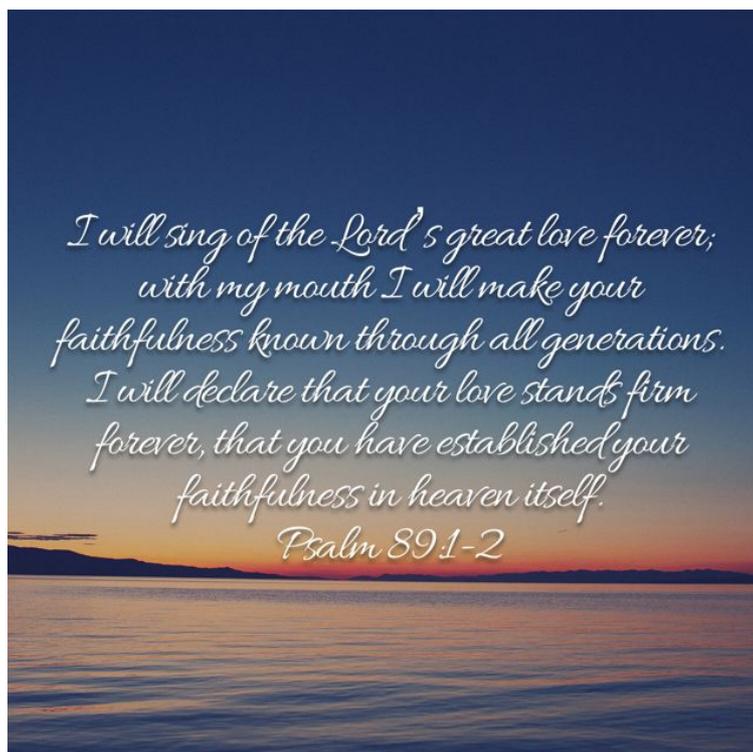
- What is the reason Paul kneels before the Father (v.14)?
 - o What, if anything, brings you to your knees in prayer? Why?
- v. 15 Who is this 'whole family' and what is its name?
 - o What are the family resemblances?
- v. 16 Paul talks about us being strengthened with power 'through his Spirit in your inner being.' What is this power he's talking about? What does it look like and how do we experience it?
- v. 17a speaks of Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith. Why would God choose to live within us? Think of the first covenant in the Old Testament, where the law was written down. What difference does it make that God dwells within us? (see Jeremiah 31:31-33; Ezekiel 11:19-20).
- What part does the Holy Spirit play when it comes to faith? How can we have faith in Jesus? What difference does faith make in your life? Pray for one another to grow in faith.

Group Exercise

- 1) Based on Ephesians 1-3, try and come up with a one line gospel for the excluded today. What is the good news you want to communicate? Make it as easy to understand as possible. What did you include or exclude, and why?
- 2) If you'd like to, try and memorise the whole section—3:14-17a. Write a one line prayer that captures Paul's prayer for the Ephesians and for us.
- 3) What are your 'family traits' (v.14) as a group? What is it about Christ that you can identify in your small group? In what ways would you like to grow more Christ-like as a group. What would you pray to see happen in the church?

Prayer and Worship

Read 1:3-14 together, aloud. Say it prayerfully and prophetically. Give thanks and praise to God.



Ephesians 3:17b-21 God Who Fills You With Love

'For Paul, love is the most important of all the Christian graces and the very heart of Christian ethics. Motivated by the supreme expression of God's own love in the sacrificial death of Christ, it springs from a transformed life filled with God's own Spirit. The primary focus of love in Paul's writings is its tangible expression within the Christian community.' (R. Mohrlang, Dictionary of Paul and his Letters, p.575)

Discussion

- What is Paul praying here and why?
- How do you experience knowing and feeling (vv. 18-19) God's love? How do knowledge and experience relate to each other in the Christian life? Which do you rely on most and why?
- In 3:19 Paul prays that we would 'know this love that surpasses knowledge.' In what ways does God's love surpass knowledge? How does human love compare?
- Paul also prays that 'you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God' (v.19). Is that going too far?! What do you think? Have you ever asked God to be filled with love like that?
- Why do you think Paul emphasises the community over against the individual? (Why does Jesus do the same in the Lord's prayer? "Our Father... Give us this day our daily bread...")

- How do you understand verse 20? Knowing that God is 'able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine,' how does that shape our prayers?
- What difference does it make to our understanding, that God is 'able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us'?
- v. 21 Why does Paul give the glory to God? Why should we?
- 'Amen' means 'let it be so' or 'let it become' and has a sense of truth, reliability, steadfastness. Jesus himself is referred to as our Amen, in 2 Cor. 1:20 and Rev. 3:14. As the song goes, and Scripture attests, 'There is power in the name of Jesus.' Think about that this week! He is God's Amen.

Group Exercise

Consider the week ahead. Think about who you'll come into contact with, and who you'd rather avoid. Think about things you're looking forward to and things you'd rather forget. Share one or two things with each other. Spend a few minutes listening to the Holy Spirit as a group. What is he saying to you as a group? What is he reminding you of or calling you to? What scriptures come to mind? Share testimonies and/or review the week you've had, next time you meet. Where did change happen?

Prayer and Worship

- What is the 'glory in the church' (v.21) you'd like to pray for?
- Pray for one another to be filled with love to the measure of the fullness of God.
- Pray the same for Christ Church W4, the church in England, the global church.

'When the rain is blowing in your face
And the whole world is on your case
I could offer you a warm embrace
To make you feel my love

When the evening shadows and the stars appear
And there is no one there to dry your tears
Oh, I could hold you for a million years
To make you feel my love'

- Adele (With echoes of the gospel?...)

Ephesians 4:1-3 God Who Gives Peace

'Paul thinks of love as a joyful response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ...It is not so much a matter of submitting to Jesus's teachings, or of imitating his earthly life, as of responding with a grateful heart to the ultimate expression of love in his death on the cross (Rom. 12:1-2)...Loving others is a way of saying "thank you" for God's love' (see 2 Cor. 8:1-9) (R. Mohrlang, Dictionary of Paul, p.577)

'Peacemaking is an attitude expressed through action.' (Ken Sande, The Peace Maker, p.293).

The patron deity of Ephesus was the goddess Artemis, a fertility god who was celebrated in the city twice a year, it being the supposed place of her birth. These celebrations would last a month long, with public processions, theatre spectacles, song and dance. These festivals were a massive tourist attraction and the city's main economic industry.

Discussion

- Conversions to Christianity in Ephesus would have reduced income at the goddess's temple, and potentially be seen as a threat to the whole city's economic set up (see what happens as a result of Paul's preaching in Acts 19:23-41). You can imagine the effect on the status quo. How does Christianity pose a challenge to the status quo in London? Do you experience this challenge yourself? In what ways?

- At the same time, Paul's message is a message of peace (4:3). What do you think he means by 'make every effort'?
- What is 'the unity of the Spirit' and 'the bond of peace'? (v.3) What does unity look like for us in the church locally, nationally, globally? What are the challenges? You might like to think closer to home than internationally.
- Jesus himself promised peace (John 14:27) but often brought disruption (see Mark 11:12-19; Luke 11:45). What other dynamics are in play when it comes to peacemaking?
- 'As a prisoner for the Lord' Paul urges us 'to live a life worthy of the calling you have received' (4:1). What is our calling and what is a 'worthy life'? How do you understand it?
- Paul also tells us to be 'completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.' No small ask! Share examples, big or small, of when you have seen these things in action, or experienced them. Who was involved? What effect did it have on you?

Group Exercise

- 1) Where is peace most absent in your local community? Discuss ways you can spread the peace of Christ to people in a practical way as a group during Advent.
- 2) In the coming week watch the video that accompanies the story of the Wolvesmouth restaurant:

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-new-yorkers-television-show-wolvesmouth>

How has chef Craig Thornton made peace with his past? Where is the gospel in this? What difference would the gospel of Christ make in that situation, and in the kitchen?...

Prayer and Worship

Ephesians 2:14: 'For he himself is our peace...' Reflect on this in quietness.

Prayer of thanksgiving for 11th November 2018 (from the lectionary):

*Blessed are you, Sovereign God,
our light and our salvation,
to you be glory and praise for ever.
Now, as darkness is falling,
wash away our transgressions,
cleanse us by your refining fire
and make us temples of your Holy Spirit.
By the light of Christ,
dispel the darkness of our hearts
and make us ready to enter your kingdom,
where songs of praise for ever sound.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

Ephesians 4:4-11 God Who Gives Grace

'You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness. But that doesn't mean you should all look and speak and act the same. Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift...' (Eph. 4:4-6, Message version)

Discussion

- In this section (vv.4-6), Paul emphasises the unity we enjoy in Christ, before describing different gifts of grace that God gives for building up the church (vv.7-11). Why does he put unity first?
- What are the potential consequences if this foundation is breached or insecure?
- What is the hope to which we are called? (v.4)
- What does it mean that there is 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all'? (v.6 cf. Rom.11:36). How would this go down in Ephesus?... (see introductory note, 11th Nov.)
- Our culture speaks of rights, talents, merit—some say we live in a 'meritocracy.' What are the advantages and

disadvantages of this? How does a gospel of grace speak into this context?

- Paul says that God has given grace to each of us (v.7). What is the best definition of grace you have heard? How does that compare with the 'graces' listed in v.11?
- What does it mean if we think we have few gifts or talents, or loads? (bear in mind verses 1-6).
- How do you experience and exercise God's grace?

Group Exercise

In Matthew 10:5-9, Jesus sends out the twelve apostles with instructions. "Freely you have received," he says, "freely give." Take some time to think about how you can give, as a group or as individuals, of the grace God has given you. Think: church, world, neighbour, needy...?

Prayer and Worship

Listen to or sing together 'You Have Won Me' by Brian Johnson, Bethel Music. Consider swapping 'me' for 'us' in the lyrics...

Pray for and encourage one another, especially those who may not be aware of their gifts. Listen to the Spirit, the giver of the gift.

Ephesians 4:11-16 God Who Builds His Church

'From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work' (Eph. 4:16).

'The Church is to be an arena in which people can be transformed into full humanity, the image of God, which means to live like Jesus, fully under the rule of God. Evangelism must therefore bear this constantly in mind. It is not about filling the waiting room for heaven with a few more customers; it is inviting people to the transformed life of the kingdom, lived as fully and as daringly as possible here, and then fulfilled and perfected in the age to come. It is the invitation to become part of a community in which, individually and together, people are being transformed to being more like Jesus. It means becoming more generous, humble, joyful and alive, and less marked by those features that diminish us as people, whether arrogance, jealousy, bitterness or cruelty.... the Church today is to be like Jesus.'

(Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church*)

Discussion

- It starts with unity with God (1:7-8), the end is unity in God (2:6-7). In the meantime there is unity to be shared, hoped and worked for (4:13). How do the different parts in this picture (verses 11-16) make a whole?
- v.11 says that it is God who gives some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers... Take some time to discuss the differences between these. Where are

these gifts of God at work in the church today? What are these gifts for (v.12)?

- What gifts do you identify in one another in your group? How can these be received, expressed, encouraged, developed?
- Read Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. What other gifts does God give to the church? What gifts do you see at work in Christ Church?
- Do you feel like you are 'growing up' in Christ (v.15)? What are the challenges and obstacles to discipleship?
- What obstacles did Jesus' disciples face and how did Jesus, and they, respond? (See, for example, Matt. 20:20-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 12:13-21; Acts 17:29-32)
- How do worship, prayer, baptism, communion... build up the church?
- What is the good news about church? How do you describe what church is about to your colleagues, family, friends? How does Ephesians shape your understanding, hopes, beliefs?

Group Exercise

Take a piece of paper. One at a time, write a sentence of blessing, truth or encouragement, or something you remember from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, with an 'and/for/so that' or other conjunction at the end, then fold it

over with only the 'and' or 'for' etc. showing. Pass on to the next person to add their own sentence, before folding down and passing on again. The sentences can be short or long. See if as a group you can write 14 connecting sentences, like the first chapter of Ephesians. Unfold the whole piece at the end and read aloud!

Prayer and Worship

- Pray for those in leadership at Christ Church and those working to build up the body of Christ. Pray for the body of Christ in the UK, and for spiritual revival in the church. Pray that the church would be willing to receive the gifts God has to give!
- Pray for areas where the global church is threatened or where there is conflict within the church.
- Pray for unity in the church. You could use Jesus's prayer for us in John 17:20-26. Pray for one another and for Christ Church W4.
- Pray Ephesians 5:8-10 as a blessing over one another, or Psalm 119 collectively (using 'we' instead of 'I').

*How great is your goodness, dear Lord!
Blessed are you for ever!
May all created things praise you, O God,
for loving us so much that we can truthfully speak
of your fellowship with mankind, even in this earthly exile;
and however virtuous we may be,
our virtue always depends on your great warmth
and generosity, dear Lord.
Your bounty is infinite.
How wonderful are your works!*

- St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Notes



Missed A Service?

Why not catch up using our Podcast? We record the talk from each of our Friday and Sunday services.

You can access them through iTunes (search Christ Church W4), our website under 'Talks', and ChurchSuite under 'My Podcasts'.