

REFRESHING

THE GLORY OF CHRIST IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

A 13-LESSON STUDY

REFORMED EXPOSITORY
BIBLE STUDY

JON NIELSON
and **BRYAN CHAPPELL**

EPHESIANS

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P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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All boxed quotations are taken from Bryan Chapell's *Ephesians* in the Reformed Expository Commentary series. Page numbers in quotations refer to that source.

ISBN: 978-1-62995-835-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-836-1 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-837-8 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.

It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation, but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith, and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

INTRODUCING EPHESIANS

Paul's epistle to the Ephesians has nourished God's people for centuries because of its soaring articulations of the beauty of the gospel of grace, the glorious purpose of the church of Christ, and the loving call believers have received to practically and obediently apply the gospel in their everyday lives—particularly regarding the way they relate to one another in the unified body of Christ. This study's thirteen lessons will divide this rich letter into manageable chunks that you can dig into while also still moving you through it during the course of one season of church life.

The opening words of this epistle indicate that its **author** is the apostle Paul (1:1), and the author reaffirms his identity midway through the letter (3:1). Critical scholars have sometimes raised questions about the letter's Pauline authorship because its style (especially within its first half) seems more abstract, more corporate, and more repetitive than that of others of his epistles. However, this revisionist thought not only denies the text's own clear statements but also naively assumes that an author cannot adjust his style to suit varied purposes. For example, while many themes and phrases from Paul's letter to the Colossians also appear in Ephesians (which further confirms its Pauline authorship), he writes Ephesians with a grander theme in mind.

Most Pauline Epistles are directed toward the problems or progress of an individual church, which requires them to begin with an initial exposition of doctrinal truths that then drive their later practical instructions. However, most scholars understand that Paul's **main purpose** for Ephesians was to write a general letter to the churches within the vicinity or cultural influence of Ephesus. For this collection of churches that were in a culture antagonistic to the gospel, Paul pens themes so grand that they can still take our breath away—and they often move even the apostle to doxology and prayer.

Paul writes to the Ephesians in the **context** of his own imprisonment—see his mentions of this in 3:1 and 6:20, which are probably referring to his house arrest in Rome from A.D. 60–62 (which is described in Acts 28 and also mentioned in Col. 4:3, 10, 18). This two-year imprisonment comes after another two years of trials and incarceration that have followed his Jewish countrymen’s initial arrest of him, in Jerusalem, on trumped-up charges. The circumstances surrounding his arrest and appeal to Caesar have kept him from personally nurturing the fledgling churches that have hatched from his missionary journeys. Yet, despite four years of being in bonds, Paul’s vision has never been freer and more expansive. He writes with the enthusiasm of a father, and the vision of a prophet, in order to inspire the infant churches he has been forced to love from afar.

Instead of following the normal **pattern** of his epistles, in which he introduces doctrinal development that is then directed at individual problems, Paul immediately moves in Ephesians from a personal salutation to a sweeping explanation of God’s eternal plan of salvation. He says that God predestined his love for the Ephesians before the creation of the world and will bring his purposes for his covenant people to culmination through the church’s transformation of the world (chapter 1). God’s eternal plan and sovereign power include and unite all races, bring the entire world under the reign of Christ through the ministry of the church, and will so definitely come to pass that they have already secured believers’ position with Christ in heaven (chapters 1 and 2). Paul presents them running to the past and future horizons of eternity, bridging earth and heaven, leveling all human barriers, transcending all human effort, and giving heavenly origin and purpose to differing gifts within the church—and yet also being driven by such an intimate love that they compel unity, mercy, and purity in the church (chapters 1 through 4). Ultimately he not only assures believers of a transformed world, a place in heaven, and a purpose on earth but also tells them how to have their lives and homes indwelt by the Spirit (chapters 5 and 6). Finally he assures them of the power that the resurrected Christ has made available for the defeat of Satan (chapter 6).

The practical instructions in the second half of the epistle are reminiscent of other Pauline epistles; but, given the grandeur of his opening subjects, the majesty and intimacy of the God he describes, and the hope that these themes provide in the midst of the apostle’s own peril, we should

not wonder at the fact that his mind and heart often fill with doxology and prayer. This epistle is rightly referenced as a key way to establish the truths of God's sovereignty in our personal salvation. However, when we lift our eyes beyond our personal borders to share even a glimpse of Paul's expansive vision, then we, too, will join his doxology about God's amazing grace—a grace that saves individuals, empowers the church, and, through both, transforms the world.

While certainly all of Scripture should be studied together by God's people, the epistle to the Ephesians will be readily and immediately applicable to the context of believers who are in the local church. Ephesians calls God's people to remember the magnificence of his eternal, sovereign plan for salvation through the work of his Son. It invites us to ponder the grace of God, which reconciles rebellious sinners vertically with their holy God even as it reconciles them horizontally with one another, despite their worldly distinctions and differences. This letter challenges and convicts us through its practical calls to unity, holiness, obedience, and love—and all within a doxological framework of praise and honor to the sovereign and redeeming God. We invite you to undertake this study for the nourishment of your soul and for the health of the body of Christ!

OUTLINE

The spiritual blessings that are given to believers through the eternal plan of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (1:1–14)

The transforming power that Christ's authority over all has made available to believers for the fulfillment of God's eternal plan (1:15–23)

God's gracious work of transforming believers from death to life in order to fulfill his eternal plan (2:1–10)

God's gracious work of uniting believers into one body for the fulfillment of his plan (2:11–22)

God's gracious work of including believers from all nations in a corporate mission for the fulfillment of his plan (3:1–13)

God's gracious work, which he performs out of the expanse of his love, of empowering believers to take part in his mission by faith (3:14–21)

God's gracious work of growing believers into one body that has different gifts by equipping them through his love (4:1–16)

God's call for those in Christ's body to walk in ways that are consistent with Christ's love (4:17–32)

God's general instruction regarding how believers are to walk in ways that are consistent with Christ's love (5:1–14)

God's household instruction regarding how believers are to walk in ways that are consistent with Christ's love (5:15–6:9)

God's provisions that enable all believers to fight against Satan's challenges to walking in Christ's ways (6:10–20)

Apostolic greetings that assure believers of the peace and love that have been made available by God's grace in Christ (6:21–24)

Bryan Chapell
Author of *Ephesians* (REC)

LESSON 1

THE FATHER'S PURPOSE

Ephesians 1:1–6

THE BIG PICTURE

As you begin your study of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, you ought to prepare your heart to be captured anew by the sovereignty our great God has displayed through your salvation, in the church of Jesus Christ, and throughout all creation into eternity. This is a glorious epistle—as well as one that has blessed the church of God for centuries.

In this lesson, you will study Paul's brief introduction to the letter, in which he introduces himself as an apostle and identifies his audience: the “saints” in Ephesus who are “faithful” in Jesus Christ (1:1–2). Then he moves quickly toward exulting in the “blessing” of God the Father, which Christians have been given as the recipients of his sovereign election for eternal salvation (1:3–6). And God's sovereign purpose for believers makes Paul truly exultant with praise: he chooses us and predestines us to receive eternal blessing through Jesus. Believers in Jesus have “every spiritual blessing” in the heavenly places (1:3), and God's purpose is to make them “holy and blameless before him” (1:4). His salvation is intimate and loving; we are adopted as his children through faith in Jesus Christ (1:5). God our Father has done all this through the work of the “Beloved”—Jesus the Son, who died and rose for his adopted children (1:6). These beautiful opening verses remind these first-century Christians—and us—of the eternal purpose the Father has for us as he brings us salvation. He planned it—and it is all by his grace and all for the eternal joy and blessing we will receive in him!

Read Ephesians 1:1–6.

GETTING STARTED

1. Why is it good to be reminded—at least sometimes—of who you *were* before you repented and put your faith in Jesus Christ? How can being reminded of our sin and rebellion cause us to praise God and worship him more joyfully for his gracious salvation and forgiveness?

2. Have you witnessed, or been involved in, debates about God's election, sovereignty, or predestination? What has been frustrating about those debates or arguments? How do those who question God's sovereignty in salvation sometimes unfairly portray him—and human beings?

Paul's Expansive Vision, pg. xvi

This epistle is rightly referenced as key for establishing the truths of God's sovereignty in our personal salvation. However, when we lift our eyes beyond personal borders to share even a glimpse of Paul's expansive vision, then we, too, will join his doxology for God's amazing grace that saves individuals, empowers the church, and through both, transforms the world.

OBSERVING THE TEXT

3. What do you notice about the way Paul introduces himself? Glance at two or three of the introductions from his other epistles. What is similar—and what is different—about the greeting and introduction he includes here?

4. Do you notice any repeated words or themes that Paul uses in Ephesians 1:3–6? What are they? What hints might they give about what he wants the Ephesians to understand about God—and about the salvation they have in him?

5. How does Paul point in these opening verses to the sovereign plan of God for the salvation of his people? In what different ways does he talk about this theological reality?

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

6. What might be the reason that Paul (here as well as in other epistles) reminds his audience of the role he holds as an “apostle of Christ Jesus” (1:1)? What does that phrase signify about the calling and authority he has been given—why, and how, does Paul say he was called to this role?
7. In what way might Paul’s greeting—both the title he gives for himself and the words of blessing his greeting contains (1:1–2)—have been deeply encouraging to the Ephesian believers? What would encourage *you* if the apostle Paul began a letter to you with these words?
8. What might be the reason that Paul uses the words *blessing* and *blessed* (twice) in verse 3? What spiritual blessings has God blessed us with in Christ? In what sense do we share in “heavenly” blessings, even now, as followers of Jesus on earth?

9. What is God’s goal and purpose for us, according to verse 4? Why is it incredibly good news that he wants to make us “holy and blameless” before him? How does God the Father ultimately accomplish this?
10. Why is the word *predestined*, which we see in verse 5, sometimes a difficult word for Christians to understand and accept? Why is God’s predestination beautiful and wonderful news, according to Paul? How does the picture of adoption help you to more fully understand the unconditional grace and acceptance God has shown you in Christ?
11. What is the end goal of God’s salvation of his people (1:6)? As we see in that same verse, who brings about God’s great, saving blessing for his people? How does the title “Beloved” add to your understanding of God the Father and God the Son?

We Are in Heaven with God, pg. 21

Because we are in union with Christ, who is in heaven, then we are in heaven with God. The apostle urges praise for God not so much because the Father is in heaven blessing us, as because we are there with him being blessed by him. . . . In our union with Christ, we are already partakers of this spiritual reality, even though it is not fully realized until we are in our glorified state.

BIBLE CONNECTIONS

12. Read Acts 9:1–6. Why is it so important to remember what Paul was like *before* his conversion and his apostolic call? How can remembering this encourage our own hearts and remind us of the grace God has shown to us in Jesus?
13. In Romans 8:15–17, Paul writes about the wonder of the “adoption” that has made Christians into sons and daughters of God. Read those verses now. What benefits come with adoption into God’s family, according to the apostle Paul?

THEOLOGY CONNECTIONS

14. The Westminster Confession of Faith describes the blessing of our adoption with these beautiful words: “All those that are justified God vouchsafeth, in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption; by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God; have his name put upon them; receive the Spirit of adoption; have access to the throne of grace with boldness; are enabled to cry, Abba, Father” (12.1). Why is this doctrine such good news—and one that is worthy of Paul’s repeated use of the word “blessing” as he describes the status we hold as God’s redeemed children?

15. The great theologian J. I. Packer writes, “If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father.”¹ Do you agree with this statement? In what way does Ephesians 1:3–6 support Packer’s assertion?

APPLYING THE TEXT

16. Paul refers to the Ephesian believers as “saints” and as “faithful” followers of Jesus Christ. Would you feel comfortable using those titles to describe yourself? Why—or why not? How might the reality of the grace God has shown to you in Jesus enable you to embrace those titles?

17. If we really grasp the truths that this passage is teaching, our necessary response is one of *praise*. Do you regularly sense your heart rising up in praise to God because of the eternal blessing of his salvation, forgiveness, and adoption? If not, why not?

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (1973; repr. Downers Grove, IL: 1993), 201, quoting an earlier article by Packer in *Evangelical Magazine* 7, pp. 19–20.

18. Why should the reality that God is your Father be an encouragement to you—both now and for eternity? How can you more actively remind yourself that God is not only your Lord but also your Father? Why might we tend to forget this glorious reality?

PRAYER PROMPT

As you conclude your study of this first passage in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, remember that your faith in Jesus Christ is not accidental or meaningless. It is part of God's eternal, gracious, and glorious plan for you; it is your heavenly Father's calling. Today, praise God for seeing fit, in his grace, to call you to repentance from your sin and to faith in his Son. Glorify him for not only forgiving you but also giving you the eternal blessing of adopting you as his child. Finally, pray that you would better understand and know the heavenly blessing that you have, even now, because of your union with Christ by faith!

Praising Our Father, pg. 19

Praise of our Father is really the focus of this passage. The apostle says that we should praise God, because he blesses us as *our* Father.