

Ephesians Reading Guide

If you had the opportunity to offer words of encouragement and challenge, a divestment of wisdom, to a group friends and family, what would you say? More to the point, if you could take by the hand your brothers and sisters in Christ and show them what it means to grow as a Christ follower, how would you do so? Perhaps you would remind them of the very foundations of their identity in Christ, pointing them toward their indissoluble hope in Christ and the grace that is theirs because the God of the universe set his love upon them before they took their very first breath. Perhaps you would invite them to remember that a part of their new, resurrection life in Christ is to be inextricably bound to other believers, living with humble selflessness that reflects the very heart of Jesus. Perhaps you would exhort them to realize that this new resurrection life will produce in them holiness and love and an existence that speaks of their place as citizens of the *now and one day* Kingdom of God. Perhaps you would extol them to filter all of their relationships through the lens of their own gospel transformation. Perhaps you would warn them of the fact that their allegiance to Christ brings real, spiritual opposition, and preparation for battle looks like a maturing faith and an ever-growing intimacy with the Lord.

The Apostle Paul spent nearly three years investing in the Church at Ephesus, and his letter to the group of churches in and around the city is filled with these exhortations, challenges, reminders, and more. In what is his most general letter to any church, Paul offers a robust exposition of the resurrection life that is now to be the lived experience of these Christian men and women.

Despite the general nature of the letter, Paul isn't writing into a cultural vacuum. These are believers who daily feel the tension of living new lives in Christ in the midst of real opposition in the form of false gods, lustful hedonism, idolatrous worship of the state, and the various and sundry everyday challenges of living in one of the largest and most influential metropolitan centers of the entire Mediterranean world. And when we think of Paul's letter to the Ephesians in those terms, it's easy to see a resemblance with our world today. We would do well to humbly sit under the wisdom offered in these six chapters, ingesting each encouragement and challenge and reminder in turn, and live together as a people whose identity is defined by our union with the resurrected Christ.

Ephesians is not a command to white knuckle our way into a new kind of behavior. It isn't some campfire singalong call to a cheap sense of camaraderie. It's an invitation to believe that God's redemptive work in our lives changes us completely, it binds us together, and it produces a new existence in us that speaks of hope and joy and humility and love that resemble the life of our Savior. Ephesians is a call to believe God when he says that we are new in Christ and, from that believing, live differently, ever in step with the Spirit. And this resurrection life touches everything about us.

May we be enthralled with the mystery of the gospel. May we see the glorious vision of a gospel-transformed community of faith living with Christ-exalting, others-serving humility. May we be a resurrection people in a dying world.

Ephesians 5:15-21 Reading Guide

Overview

Life is hard. Those three words will surprise no one, of course. But it's as if Paul, knowing that to be the case, invites the Ephesian believers to recognize that reality in a tangible way and to see just how significant a part they play, with the Spirit, in supporting and encouraging one another in the midst of this painful, challenging, and wonderful thing that is life. It's so easy to read these words from Paul and think of them in individualistic terms. *I* have to be careful as to how *I* walk, *I* need to be wise, *I* need to be filled with the Spirit, *I* need to give thanks, *I* need to submit. And certainly there is an individual component to all of this. But Paul is writing to the Church, together. There is an implied participation and responsibility that comes with being a part of the family of God, and Paul is building on that here.

You've hopefully experienced this before. Perhaps you can recall an intangible sense of encouragement when, after a particularly difficult week at work, you step into a Sunday morning worship gathering depleted only to have your needs met as you participate in worship with brothers and sisters, as the Word is preached, as you approach the Lord's Table with others. Maybe it has happened in the far less formal context of hymns sung and prayers offered around a campfire with friends. Maybe it's happened in a life group, a more intimate Bible study, or in all of these ways. This is the work of the Spirit through the people of God.

There is an implicit call to presence contained in these verses. We participate in mutual edification with our brothers and sisters in Christ as we gather together. There is a sense in which the Lord has created the Church to function so that we might say, together, "if we am going to be who God, in Christ, has made us to be, filled with all the fullness of God (as Paul has already prayed), then God has established it so that we need one another to get there." Life is surely hard, but we are made to move forward together.

15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Ephesians 5:15-21

Supplemental Passages

Psalm 100

This well known Psalm is a corporate call to thanksgiving. It is an invitation for the people of God, together, to worship the Lord with gratitude for his faithfulness, much in the way that we see thankfulness tied to worship in our Ephesians passage.

Colossians 3:1-17

There is thematic similarity between Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5. Paul is, here, challenging believers to live as those who have been made new in Christ, and he concludes this section with a similar call to mutual participation in worship so as to honor the Lord and encourage one another. There is also a central call to thankfulness to the Lord that runs through both passages that should inform our worship.

Revelation 5

Worship could be considered the language of heaven. In this remarkable scene, John is witness to the heavenly hosts' songs of praise to the Lord. It is no small thing to participate in worship together here, on earth, because as we do we are participating in a Kingdom-activity that will stretch into eternity.

Songs to Consider

"I Need Thee" - by Robert Lowry & Annie S. Hawks (The Village Church Worship Version)
"Great Is Thy Faithfulness" by T.O. Chisholm and W.M. Runyan
"O Praise the Name" by Hillsong Worship
"Jesus, Thank You" by Sovereign Grace Music

Life Group Discussion Questions

- 1) Our passage is integrally connected to the previous passage (5:1-14). In those earlier verses, Paul commands believers to *walk* in specific ways (5:2 and 5:8). What are those? How do they inform our understanding of his command to "look carefully then how you walk" in 5:15?
- 2) Paul, in 5:17, challenges believers to understand what the will of the Lord is. Based only on Eph 4-5, how would you describe what the will of the Lord is for believers?
- 3) Look back through Ephesians (i.e. 2:11-22) — what does the Spirit do in the lives of believers? Why do you think Paul connects being filled with the Spirit and our worship together?
- 4) Why is thankfulness important in worship?
- 5) How might the example of Jesus's life shape our understanding of what it means to submit to one another (5:21)? How have you been selflessly served by others in the Church?