

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 3:1-13

Overview

The word “unique” is dramatically overused and misapplied in our world. There’s a certain irony in the fact that a word that means “one of a kind,” has become so commonplace as to be neutered of all verbal force beyond a vague sense of *different-ness*. But some things really are one of a kind, and the Church is such a thing. Nothing like it has ever been, nor will it ever be.

In this passage, Paul attempts to share his prayer for the Ephesians, but gets sidetracked recounting the glorious purposes of God now visibly alive in the world in a way that, for millennia before, they were not. Paul reminds the readers/hearers that his imprisonment and suffering are not purposeless. In fact, in this section, he continually emphasizes the grace that was given him to experience and proclaim this hidden mystery that is now revealed in the coming together of Jews and Gentiles in one body, heirs of the same promise, united in Christ. And Paul knows he’s on the front lines of something different, something that hints at eternity, something that offers a glimpse of the heart and mind of God let loose upon the world.

The Church is not God’s Plan B. This was the mystery, the plan hidden in ages past, now brought into the light through the death and resurrection of Christ. In a world that, under the sway of the Enemy, encourages division and bitterness, the unification of the people of God represents the manifold wisdom of God on full display. And we don’t simply have a front row seat — we get to participate alongside Paul and the Ephesians and all those who have been or ever will be a part of God’s family in Christ. What grace!

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— 2 assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. 4 When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. 6 This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

7 Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. 8 To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, 10 so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 11 This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. 13 So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

Ephesians 3:1-13

Supplemental Passages

Acts 21

Paul's states that he is a prisoner "on behalf of you Gentiles" (3:1), and that his suffering is their glory (3:13). While those may seem to be strange statements, Acts 21 provides us the likely backdrop for Paul's imprisonment and helps us understand why Paul would say such things. He is imprisoned because of his commitment to the gospel going to the Gentiles and their full inclusion amongst the people of God.

Galatians 3

In this, another passage from Paul, we read a broader account of his theological understanding of the inclusion of Gentiles amongst God's family in Christ. He points all the way back to the promises that God made to Abraham and offers this remarkable, beautiful phrase, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

Suggested Songs

"Christ Our Hope in Life and Death" by Keith & Kristyn Getty, Matt Boswell, & Matt Papa
"King of Kings" by Hillsong Worship
"Yes and Amen" by Housefires
"Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus" by Louisa Stead

Life Group Discussion Questions

- 1) What is the "mystery" that Paul talks about in this passage and why is it such good news?
- 2) What first comes to mind when you think about the Church broadly (beyond Summit)? Based on your experience, how does the world view the Church, generally?
- 3) Why is it encouraging to know that the Church was a part of God's plan from the very beginning?
- 4) Paul, writing from prison, talks about what a grace it is to be able to serve the Church. Do our words and actions reflect that kind of love for the Church?
- 5) What is one way that we might, this week, actively practice love for the Church that reflects Paul's heart in these verses?