

Ephesians: a guided study

What does being united with Christ mean for the church's shared life?

Ephesians presents God's purpose to unite all things in Christ and form a reconciled people through him. Salvation by grace issues in good works; reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles becomes a pattern of peace. The second half shows this identity taking shape in speech, work, worship, relationships, and resistance to evil. Christian maturity is corporate as well as personal.

Read the letter in its setting

The letter names Paul and presents him as imprisoned. Traditional readings connect it with Roman custody; scholars debate direct Pauline authorship, dating, and whether it circulated beyond Ephesus, partly because some early witnesses omit the city name in the address. These questions should remain visible rather than being disguised as a settled itinerary. Read the letter's theological and pastoral argument on its own terms alongside its close connections with Colossians.

Biblical references: Ephesians 1:1 · Ephesians 3:1–13 · Ephesians 6:19–24

Sources: primary, brown

Follow the argument

Chapters 1–3 move through blessing, prayer, rescue by grace, and the removal of hostility between peoples. Chapters 4–6 call the resulting community to maturity and a transformed way of life. Household instructions belong to the unequal structures of the ancient world; their call to Christ-shaped conduct cannot justify coercion or slavery. Christians disagree about marriage roles, while Christ's self-giving and the prohibition of threats remain essential to interpretation.

Biblical references: Ephesians 1:3–2:22 · Ephesians 4:1–6:24

Sources: primary

Blessing and hope in Christ

Ephesians 1:1–23

The opening blessing links adoption, redemption, forgiveness, and the Spirit with God’s purpose in Christ. A prayer asks that believers understand their hope and the power displayed in Christ’s resurrection. Traditions differ over election; begin with the passage’s intention to produce gratitude and confident dependence rather than speculative certainty about others.

For reflection

What does the prayer suggest believers still need to understand about gifts they have already received?

Grace creates a reconciled people

Ephesians 2:1–22

Rescue from death to life is God's gift and leads to good works. The argument then addresses Gentiles once excluded and the peace Christ makes between divided peoples. The temple image describes a shared dwelling for God; it must not be used to disparage Jewish identity or erase the history of Israel's promises.

For reflection

How does the movement from grace to good works connect with the movement from exclusion to belonging?

A revealed purpose and a prayer

Ephesians 3:1–21

The mystery now made known concerns Gentiles sharing in the promise through Christ. Paul's ministry serves that purpose, and his prayer asks for strength to grasp Christ's love. The chapter invites a church to understand its life within God's generous purpose, not to imagine itself above accountability.

For reflection

Why might understanding Christ's love strengthen a divided community more deeply than winning a status contest?

Growing together into Christ

Ephesians 4:1–32

Unity does not mean identical gifts. Ministries equip the whole body, while renewed life changes truthfulness, anger, labor, and speech. The instruction to speak truth in love joins honesty with another person's good. Work creates an opportunity to share with people in need, not only to secure one's own comfort.

For reflection

Which habits of speech would help the whole community grow rather than merely release frustration?

Love within unequal households

Ephesians 5:1–6:9

Imitating Christ's love frames instructions about worship, marriage, children, and enslaved people. Christians debate how mutual submission and differentiated marriage instructions apply today. Husbands must love sacrificially and masters must abandon threats; neither marriage nor religious authority authorizes abuse. Addressing slavery within the ancient household does not establish it as God's ideal.

For reflection

How does Christ's self-giving confront the misuse of power in each relationship described?

Stand firm through truth and prayer

Ephesians 6:10–24

The armor imagery draws together truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and God's word. The struggle is not a mandate to treat other people as enemies. Persistent prayer includes other believers and Paul's witness, and the closing introduction of Tychicus gives this cosmic language a practical human connection.

For reflection

How do the named pieces of armor change what spiritual resistance looks like in ordinary life?

Sources

- [primary] Ephesians; primary biblical text. Reading references only; no Bible text is reproduced in this resource. <https://ebible.org/eng-web/EPH.htm>
- [brown] Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Doubleday, 1997), chapter 28. Background and scholarly discussion; not an endorsement of every interpretation in this study.

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