THE CORNERSTONE OF OUR FAITH

Reclaiming Our Spiritual Heritage
A Study of Ephesians
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Published by 21st Century Christian
table of contents

About the Author 4
How to Use This Study 5
Introduction 6
1 Reclaiming Our Identity 7
2 Reclaiming Our Position in Christ 13
3 Reclaiming the Mind to Serve Others 19
4 Reclaiming Peace Through Unity 23
5 Reclaiming Seven Marks of Church Unity—Part 1 29
6 Reclaiming Seven Marks of Church Unity—Part 2 35
7 Reclaiming Wholesome Living 41
8 Reclaiming the Will of God 47
9 Reclaiming Godly Marriage—Wives 51
10 Reclaiming Godly Marriage—Husbands 57
11 Reclaiming Honor for Whom Honor Is Due 63
12 Reclaiming Our Godly Work Ethic 69
13 Reclaiming Our Spiritual Protection 75
about the author

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how to use this study

Each lesson in this *The Cornerstone of Our Faith* study has four major parts.

Every lesson begins with an introductory section called **The Foundation**. In this section, the author will give background material to help prepare your mind and heart for God’s Word.

The second part of each lesson is called **The Cornerstone**. This section is always the heart of every lesson. The Bible is explored in detail to help us understand the text. Those who are accustomed to hearing African-American preaching can hear this section “preach.” God’s Word is powerfully presented so that all can understand.

The next section of each study is critical for the Word to fulfill its intended purpose. It is called **The Inscription**. Just as people take note of inscriptions on cornerstones or monuments, each lesson is written so as to drive home a point worth remembering and a principle worth following. It offers the encouragement to change attitudes or behaviors to align better with God’s Word. To *know* the Bible is one thing; to *do* it is another.

Every lesson ends with a series of thought-provoking **Discussion Questions** that help you explore God’s Word on a personal and a congregational level. These questions provide opportunities for group discussion and participation. Teachers can tell by the responses whether their students have really come to grips with the lesson.
introduction

Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus provides great insight into our blessings “in Christ.” In Paul’s typical writing style, he lays a doctrinal foundation in the first half of the book and then helps us build our lives upon that foundation in the last half.

Paul reminds us what a blessed people we actually are. God has showered His grace upon us, but for a purpose. He wants us to be dispensers of grace to those in the world around us. God pours blessings in and asks us to pour His boundless blessings out to others. As we release His blessings to others, we are open to receive fresh blessings for our own lives.
Reclaiming Our Identity

_Ephesians 1:1-14_

As identity theft runs rampant today, consumers must take unprecedented measures to protect their livelihood. It is no longer enough to keep one’s wallet tucked away in his or her pocket; we must also be alert to online threats as well or risk having our bank accounts drained by modern-day pickpockets who prey upon victims in distant locations without ever coming face to face with them. Such an environment requires us to guard our identity very carefully, and in turn we still must stand ready to quickly prove our identity.

Spiritually speaking, we must likewise go to great lengths to keep a firm handle on who we are. If we don’t maintain a firm grip on our place of origin (heaven), and who we stand for (Christ), the world stands ready to pigeonhole us. Our study of Ephesians will help us become more familiar with our intended purpose as members of the body of Christ, the Lord’s church.

Thankfully, Scripture spends considerable time helping us more clearly see our true identity. Not only is our identity in Christ solid, our position was defined even before the world was created. If we understand and believe our purpose and position, we are more likely to live according to our God-
given purpose. In Ephesians 1:1-9, Paul reminds us that we have been “set apart for God” to live as faithful followers of Jesus.

Unlike other letters such as 1 Corinthians, Ephesians does not include specific references to issues in the church itself. Its teachings are general, and thus finding suitable application in nearby congregations, such as Smyrna, Thyatira, Pergamos, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The church in Ephesus seems to have had its start in Acts 18:19, and this same church is referenced in Revelation 1:11 along with six other nearby congregations.

Considered a major religious area, commercial magnet, and cultural center, Ephesus was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia. This city was also an important religious center, and its temple was dedicated to the pagan goddess, Artemis and considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

The first three chapters of Ephesians proclaim God’s eternal plan to redeem the fallen creation through Jesus Christ. God brings all creation together through the redemptive work and sacrifice of Christ. As a result, Christ has been made the head (1:10). Because of Christ, there’s no longer a distinction of Jews and Gentiles. Instead, the body of Christ consists of one spiritual race, a royal priesthood of believers in which all members coexist on the same level and in one spiritual house. God’s new covenant house of believers includes all who have been brought near to God through the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ according to Ephesians 2:17-22.

In short, salvation has been brought down from heaven in the person of Jesus Christ—Mary’s baby, the one whom John
the baptizer later identified as the “The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” Through his sacrificial work on Mount Calvary, the one God who is above all in Ephesians 4 brings together all races in one church, which is the body of Christ (1:23). It is the sacred temple, in which God lives through the Holy Spirit (2:21, 22), and it is described as the bride of Christ (5:25-32). As such, the people of God are the church—not the physical buildings in which we worship. Therefore, the people of God are holy and serve as the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit.

Those who through God’s grace have been saved (2:8-10) must live as God’s people. In the second half of the letter the writer exhorts his readers to live in such a way as to show that they are God’s children, loving one another as Christ loved them. As children of God they are expected to be like their Father, God himself (5:1).

Paul begins with a liberating proclamation in Ephesians 1:3. God has “blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” To fully grasp this thought is mind-boggling, to say the least. Not only has God blessed us, he has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. God doesn’t half-step. He does big things for us—even setting the tone of His big-time blessings on us with a big-time Savior called Jesus Christ. He makes this great declaration in verse three, which in the original Greek language forms the beginning of one very long sentence that ends in verse fourteen.

To make sure we do not misunderstand what he means by “every spiritual blessing,” Paul spells them out one by one.

First, we are privileged to be chosen by God as His adopted children. While some misunderstand “chosen” to mean God randomly chooses some for salvation and others for condemnation, this is not the case. The point here is that God has made it possible for all individuals—both Jews and Gentiles alike—to become His children.
As His adopted children, God has given us the benefits of a child born naturally into His family (Ephesians 1:5, 6). All of this was made possible through the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Unlike some modern-day adoptions that may result in children becoming wards again of the state, we can rest assured that God has truly adopted us and won’t leave us hanging. If our relationship with God becomes strained, we’ve left Him because He’s always faithful (Isaiah 59:1-3).

Beginning in verse seven, Paul lists four additional blessings we receive as God’s children. We are: redeemed (1:7), forgiven (1:7), enriched (1:8) and enlightened (1:9, 10).

Redemption means we are bought back or reclaimed by God. Many of us grew up in a time in which it was commonplace to return our empty soda bottles for redemption. Doing so earned us a refund in part or in whole of the bottle deposit paid. Otherwise, we had to pay for the cost of the bottles each time we purchased sodas. Likewise, God accepts the atoning sacrifice of Christ as a trade-in for our lives when we obey the gospel (Ephesians 2:13-16).

Forgiven means forgiven—really. When God forgives us, He cancels out our debt of sin. To fully appreciate this blessing, let us consider the nature of God. Since God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18), we take comfort in the fact that He truly forgives us. If He were to cancel a debt, and then later disregard His cancellation, He would then become a liar. Humans sometimes claim to forgive others, only to dig up old faults after the “forgiven” party trips later.

Enrichment goes far beyond God simply meeting our basic needs. Instead, He has “lavished” us with His grace. Yes, grace is God’s unmerited favor, but it also includes His understanding and great compassion. As our creator, He understands our frailties and shortcomings—even better than we ourselves (Psalm 103:13, 14).
We also learn how God has enlightened us to the mystery of his plan to bring all things together through Christ. We learn here that even before He laid the foundation of the earth, God planned for Christ to serve as our Great Redeemer and rule as both Lord and King until He returns and serves as our Judge before returning the kingdom to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

Not only has God revealed His eternal plan to us, He has provided His children with a down payment to serve as a guarantee of our good standing in Christ (Ephesians 1:14). In fact, we have been “sealed” with the Holy Spirit, who stamps us as belonging to God. As some might say, we have been signed, sealed, and delivered (from the bondage of sin). Since this is our spiritual reality, let’s not live as though we remain as spiritual convicts. Since we already know how the movie of life ends, let’s not panic as though God is going to change the script (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18). God is faithful and trustworthy!

Questions for Discussion
1. Why is it necessary to have a firm handle on our spiritual identity?
2. What background do we have about the church at Ephesus and the city of Ephesus? How does this relate to us today?
3. How is the letter of Ephesians structured, and how does its structure help us more clearly understand its purpose?
4. What does it mean to be adopted children of God? Why is this significant for us today?
5. How would you explain spiritual redemption? What are some everyday examples we might use to describe the concept of redemption?

6. Based on Ephesians 1:8, how can Christians be described as rich?

7. Discuss the significance of the Holy Spirit as a down payment of our standing with Christ. When do you sometimes become uncertain of your spiritual standing with God? What can we do to better solidify ourselves?