

# *You are loved!*

## **Introducing Ephesians**

For many, the letter to the Ephesians is their favourite of the letters in the New Testament. It is not too long, but is packed with a combination of big theological themes and practical advice for living. For others it can seem a bit daunting!

A lot has been written about who Ephesians was written to and even who wrote it. Ephesians is unusual in that it doesn't mention specific individuals or address particular issues in a single church. Some have suggested that it might have been written by close friends of Paul on his behalf, rather than Paul himself –on the grounds that Paul spent a long time in Ephesus and therefore would have been more personal in his message.

However, the evidence suggests that Ephesians was written as a circular letter to several churches. Some early manuscripts don't have '*Ephesus*' in 1:1 –it was probably left blank so that each particular town could put its name in the blank for its own copy. We just have most copies surviving of the one sent to Ephesus.

This would explain the more impersonal style that Paul uses and the thinking and the ideas are certainly in keeping with his other letters. We are therefore safe in assuming that Paul is the writer.

As with all New Testament letters, Paul doesn't write Ephesians as a theology book. It is a letter and is meant to read as such, although the style is a bit different. Here, Paul is not writing to address particular problems in a church or to correct their understanding. Instead, Ephesians is written as a letter of encouragement for its readers and includes prayers for them. It can seem pretty heavy going at first, but gets easier to understand and more practical as it goes on.



## **Practicalities**

Within your group, some of you will probably enjoy the deep theological themes and some will prefer the practical advice, but both are important for living, so try and use your different gifts and preferences to help one another.

As always, the questions in the 'Word' section are not designed to have 'a right' or 'wrong' answer. They are intended to start discussions so that as a group you can explore the passages together.

Just as Paul expresses himself in prayer and encouragement, I hope that these sessions will inspire you to pray together and encourage one another in following Jesus. To quote Paul (3:17-19 in 'The Message'), over the next few weeks...

*I ask God that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all the Christians the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God!*

## **Further Reading**

To study more of Ephesians, you may find it helpful to read through the letter in a different translation such as the New Living (NLT) or Contemporary English (CEV). A study Bible with notes such as the 'NIV Life Application Bible' or NIV Study Bible can help further. Paraphrases such as 'The Message' can also give a fresh angle –although these aren't a substitute for having one of the mainstream modern translations as your main Bible –the TNIV (Today's NIV) is particularly good.

*Toby*

# You are loved!

## 1: You are Chosen!

### WELCOME

*Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...*

Each share one good and one bad moment from the last few weeks.

### WORSHIP

*Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...*

Use Ephesians 1:3. Each think of a few ways that God has blessed you –some may seem more ‘spiritual’ and others not. Each write them down on slips of paper. Mix them up in the middle. Take turns to pick two out and read them. After each, everyone say together ‘Praise God’.

### WORD

It seems that Ephesians was written as a circular letter to be read out in a number of churches in and around Ephesus.

**Only if you’re feeling brave...!** To get a feel for how it would have sounded, you could try reading the whole letter through first –either out loud or individually. You could use ‘The Message or a similar version. Be warned though, it might seem a bit much to take in all at once! Discuss your initial reactions and which bits you’re particularly interested in looking at more closely over the next few weeks.

### Read Ephesians 1

NB: This is a tough starting passage! Ephesians will get easier!

**Discuss** your initial reactions to the passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you’ve been doing, reading or thinking about?

## Growth Group Notes

### Sept-Nov 2009



- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- If you replace 'Ephesus' with 'Alsager' in v1, how do you feel about being addressed in the way Paul writes in verses 1-2?
- Paul is painting a big picture –starting with pre-creation (v4) to the end times (v14). How does it feel to be part of God's big picture? How much are you aware of it in your daily life?
- In Mark 1:17-18 and elsewhere, Jesus chooses to call people to follow him, but they have to choose to follow. How does it feel to be 'chosen' by God? What difference does it make?
- Paul packs several mega-themes into this passage, including...
  - Being adopted as God's children
  - Being redeemed –freed from slavery, as in the Exodus
  - Being forgiven our sins
  - God's grace
  - Being marked with the Holy Spirit
  - All things eventually under Christ's reign (v10)
  - The good news (gospel) of being saved (v13)

Pick 1-2 of these (maybe do some more in later weeks) and ask:

- What do you **think** about this?
- How do you **feel** about this?
- What should you **do** about this?

## WHAT NEXT?

Paul doesn't stop giving thanks and praying for the members of the churches (v16).

- Give thanks and pray for one another.
- With Alpha starting soon, who could you invite? Give thanks for them, pray for them... and why not find a way to invite them before you next meet!

# You are loved!

## 2: You are saved!

### WELCOME

*Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...*

If you were saved from a near-certain death, how would it change how you lived?

### WORSHIP

*Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...*

Look through a psalm (eg 103) with some quiet background music. Imagine you are going on a desert island and you are only allowed to take a verse or a few words of the Psalm with you for the rest of your life for your encouragement or to remind you of one aspect of God etc. Which would you choose? Write it down on a piece of paper. Now each share what you've chosen and why. Then pray together based on what you've shared.

### WORD

#### Read Ephesians 2

**Discuss** your initial reactions to the passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)



- In your experience, what differences are there in the way we live between following 'the way of the world' (v1-3) and following the way of Jesus (v4-10)?
- Paul makes a strong contrast between our status as the 'way you were' and the 'way you are'. But although our status changes, often our lifestyles are slower to change and we make plenty of mistakes. How do you find this is true in your experience? How do you tend to respond personally? What do you think God's view of this is?
- Paul is so keen to emphasise God's role in saving us, that he mentions his love, mercy, grace, kindness and gift within a couple of sentences! How does this fit with your picture of God?
- How easy do you find it to accept that we are saved by God's grace and not by our own works (v8-9)? What difference should this make to the way you live?
- Sometimes we feel that doing good works are an optional extra in life, but Paul points out that although good works don't save us, we are designed to do them (v10). What do you think of this? Is this how you think in practice?
- What does it mean to be members of God's household together in which God's Spirit lives (v19-22)? How do you feel about it?

## **WHAT NEXT?**

Paul writes that we are both God's workmanship and created to do good works (v10).

Share one good thing that you could do this week that you don't do in a normal week. Commit to doing it.

Pray for one another & pray for Alpha that the guests would feel welcomed and relaxed, make friends, enjoy the course and also grow closer to God through exploring issues of faith and life together.

# You are loved!

## 3: You are loved!

### WELCOME

*Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...*

Each share: Who is your best earthly friend and why?

### WORSHIP

*Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...*

Each draw/sketch/paint a picture expressing God's love.

### WORD

#### Read Ephesians 3

**Discuss** your initial reactions to the passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- How do you react to the role of the church Paul gives in verse 10?
- Imagine approaching God –what would you be thinking? How does this compare to verse 12?
- Paul switches from teaching to prayer in v14-21. How would you feel if someone prayed this prayer for you?
- What does Paul's prayer say about his relationship with his readers? What does it say about God's relationship with us?

## **Growth Group Notes**

### **Sept-Nov 2009**



- Paul mentions love and power throughout his prayer. How does Paul's picture of love and power compare with the world's today?
- In what ways have you experienced the love that Paul describes?
- Many people in our community today would not begin to recognise the scale of God's love. What reasons can you think of for this? What do you think would cause this to change?
- In what ways can you show others the scale of God's love –as individuals... as a group... as a church?
- What situations would you like God to act powerfully in? Can you imagine him doing it? How easy do you find it to believe that God could do immeasurably more than this –using the same power that he has placed within us (v20-21)?

## **WHAT NEXT?**

Imagine how Alsager might be different if large numbers of people chose to follow God's ways. Ask God to do immeasurably more than this and pray for one another that he would use you.

Now split into twos. Share any personal situations that you would like God to act in. Pray for one another by reading out verses 14-21 to each other in turn.