PAUL'S LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

The King's Masterpiece

Ephesians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Masterpiece: Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

Galatians was a fight. Ephesians is a view from the mountaintop. There's no crisis in this letter, no named troublemakers, no angry outbursts. Instead, Paul, writing from a prison cell, steps back and shows his readers the biggest picture he can: what God planned before the world began, what He did through Jesus, and what kind of people He's making out of the mess of humanity.

Some of the most famous lines in the New Testament come from this short letter. Saved by grace through faith, not by works. God's handiwork, created to do good. The dividing wall torn down. The love of Christ that's wider and longer and higher and deeper than we can understand. Speaking the truth in love. The armor of God.

Ephesians is also a letter about identity. If you've ever wondered who you really are, whether you matter, whether you belong anywhere, Paul has answers. In Christ, he says, you're chosen, adopted, forgiven, sealed with the Spirit, raised up, seated with Jesus, and part of a new family that includes people you would never have picked. And then, in the second half, he shows what it looks like to live that identity out: in your words, your anger, your friendships, your home, and your battles.

There's a simple way to remember the shape of the letter. In chapters 1 to 3, you sit: you rest in what God has done. In chapters 4

and 5, you walk: you live it out. In chapter 6, you stand: you hold your ground against everything that tries to knock you down. Sit, walk, stand. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all six chapters of Ephesians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains Paul's thinking in plain language and adds background about the city of Ephesus, the Roman world, and the words and ideas Paul uses.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains Ephesus and its famous temple, what happened when Paul lived there, why he was in prison when he wrote, and some questions scholars still discuss about who first received the letter and who wrote it. It's worth reading first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

Ephesians is short and its sentences are long and rich, so this book quotes it sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words. Keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of Ephesians first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, Romans, the Corinthian letters, and Galatians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through Ephesians chapter by chapter. Because the letter is short, I've quoted it sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase and explanation, with extra background and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Ephesians raises some questions that scholars and churches discuss: whether the words in Ephesus belong in 1:1, since some early manuscripts lack them; whether the letter was meant to circulate among several churches; whether Paul wrote it himself or a close follower wrote in his name; and how to understand God's choosing in chapter 1. I've presented these briefly and fairly, without trying to settle every debate. The letter presents itself as Paul's, and I refer to the author as Paul throughout.

Two passages need special care with teenagers: the instructions to wives and husbands in 5:21–33, and to slaves and masters in 6:5–9. I've explained them briefly and with balance, noting how they begin with mutual submission in 5:21, how they compare with the household rules of the Roman world, and how Christians hold different views on marriage roles. I've also said plainly that these passages never require anyone to accept abuse, and that the Bible's words to slaves are not an endorsement of slavery. You may want to talk these sections through together.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will discover who they are in Christ, and grasp, even a little, how wide and long and high and deep His love really is.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

The City of Ephesus

Ephesus was one of the great cities of the Roman Empire, on the west coast of what is now Turkey. It was the leading city of the Roman province of Asia (not the continent, but a region covering the western part of modern Turkey). Estimates of its population vary, but it may have had well over 100,000 people, which made it one of the biggest cities in the eastern Mediterranean.

Ephesus was a port city with a harbor connected to the sea, a center of trade where roads from the east met ships from the west. It had a huge marble main street, public baths, a library (the famous Library of Celsus came a little later), a stadium, and a theater carved into a hillside that could seat around 25,000 people. Today, its ruins are among the best-preserved ancient sites in the world. The harbor eventually filled with silt, and the coastline is now several miles away.

The Temple of Artemis

Ephesus was most famous for its temple to Artemis, the goddess the Romans called Diana. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, a gigantic marble building with more than a hundred columns, several times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. Pilgrims came from all over the world to worship there. The temple also worked like a bank, holding deposits for cities, kings, and ordinary people.

The Artemis of Ephesus wasn't quite the same as the Greek huntress. Her statue was covered with rows of rounded objects that have been interpreted as breasts, eggs, or other symbols, and she was honored as a powerful protector of the city. A whole economy grew up around her: priests, festivals, souvenir shrines, and craftsmen who made a living from her worship.

Magic and the Powers

Ephesus was also known for magic. People wrote spells and charms to protect themselves from evil spirits, curse their enemies, or gain love and money. So-called Ephesian letters, magical words written on scrolls or amulets, were famous. Many people believed their lives were controlled by spiritual powers, the stars, and fate.

That helps explain why Ephesians talks so much about powers and authorities in the heavenly realms. Paul wants his readers to know that Jesus is seated far above every power, and that they don't need to live in fear.

Paul in Ephesus

Acts 18 and 19 tell how Paul came to Ephesus. He visited briefly on his second journey, leaving his friends Priscilla and Aquila there. On his third journey, he came back and stayed about three years (Acts 20:31), longer than anywhere else on his missionary journeys.

At first he taught in the synagogue for three months. When some opposed him, he moved to a lecture hall belonging to a man named Tyrannus, and taught there daily for two years. Acts says that so many people heard the message that it spread throughout the province of Asia. Churches were probably started in nearby cities like Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis during this time, often by Paul's coworkers.

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul in Ephesus. Some Jewish exorcists tried to use the name of Jesus like a magic spell and were beaten up by the demon-possessed man they were trying to help. As a result, many new believers who had practiced magic brought their scrolls and burned them publicly. Acts says the scrolls were worth fifty thousand drachmas, a fortune, maybe the wages of a hundred people for a year or more.

The Riot

Then trouble came. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, realized that if people stopped worshiping idols, he and his fellow craftsmen would lose business. He gathered them and stirred them up. Soon the whole city was in an uproar. A crowd rushed into the theater, dragging two of Paul's companions with them, and shouted for about two hours, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Paul wanted to go in and face the crowd, but his friends wouldn't let him. Eventually the city clerk calmed everyone down.

After that, Paul left Ephesus. Later, on his way to Jerusalem, he asked the elders of the Ephesian church to meet him at Miletus, a nearby port. His farewell speech in Acts 20 is one of the most emotional scenes in Acts. They wept, hugged him, and walked him to the ship, knowing they would probably never see him again.

A Letter from Prison

Paul calls himself a prisoner three times in Ephesians, and near the end he calls himself an ambassador in chains. Where was he? The traditional view is Rome, where Acts 28 says Paul spent two years under house arrest, chained to a soldier but able to receive visitors, around AD 60 to 62. Some scholars suggest an earlier imprisonment,

perhaps in Caesarea, where Paul was held for two years before being sent to Rome.

Ephesians is one of four letters often called the Prison Letters, along with Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Ephesians and Colossians are especially similar. Both mention Tychicus as the one carrying the letter (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7), so they were probably delivered on the same trip.

The Missing Words

Here's something you might not expect. In 1:1, the NIV footnote says some early manuscripts don't have the words in Ephesus. Some of the oldest copies we have simply say something like to the holy people who are faithful in Christ Jesus, with no city named.

There are other clues too. Paul had spent three years in Ephesus and knew the church well, yet this letter has no personal greetings to anyone. He says he has heard about their faith (1:15) and assumes they have heard about his ministry (3:2), which sounds odd for a church he founded. In the second century, a teacher named Marcion called this letter the letter to the Laodiceans.

A Circular Letter?

Many scholars think Ephesians was a circular letter, written to be passed around several churches in the province of Asia, with Ephesus as the main city and perhaps the first stop. That could explain the missing city name and the lack of personal greetings. Some even connect it with the letter Paul mentions in Colossians 4:16, which the Colossians were to get from Laodicea.

Others think the letter was written to Ephesus but meant for a wider audience, or that the church had grown so much since Paul left that

many members didn't know him personally. Either way, Ephesians reads like a letter for the whole church, then and now.

Who Wrote It?

The letter says it's from Paul, and the early church accepted it as his. But many modern scholars think it was written by a close follower of Paul after his death, using Paul's name to apply his teaching to a new generation. They point to its style, with extremely long sentences (1:3–14 is one sentence in Greek), some vocabulary Paul doesn't use elsewhere, its close similarity to Colossians, and its focus on the worldwide church.

Other scholars argue that Paul wrote it. They note that writing style can change with subject, mood, and the use of a secretary; that a letter written to many churches would naturally be more general; that the similarities to Colossians make sense if Paul wrote both at the same time; and that writing in someone else's name was not as accepted in the early church as some suppose. Christians on both sides agree that Ephesians belongs in the Bible and speaks with authority. In this book, I follow the letter's own claim and call the author Paul.

The Map

Chapters 1 to 3: what God has done. Every spiritual blessing in Christ. Saved by grace. Jews and Gentiles made one new people. The mystery revealed. A prayer to know the love of Christ.

Chapters 4 to 6: how to live it. Keep the unity of the Spirit. Grow up together, speaking the truth in love. Put off the old self and put on the new. Live as children of light. Love and serve one another at home. And stand firm in the armor of God.

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CHAPTER 1

Every Spiritual Blessing

Ephesians 1

Paul begins the usual way: his name, his readers, and a greeting of grace and peace. He calls himself an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will, and he writes to God's holy people, the faithful in Christ. (As you read in Setting the Scene, the words in Ephesus are missing from some early copies, so this may have been a letter for several churches.)

Then Paul takes a deep breath and starts praising God. And he doesn't stop for twelve verses. In the original Greek, verses 3 to 14 are one gigantic sentence of more than two hundred words. It's like someone so excited they can't find a place to put a period. It's been compared to a snowball rolling downhill, getting bigger as it goes.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **One Long Sentence**
>
> English translations break Paul's sentence into several, because nobody wants to read a two-hundred-word sentence in English. But in Greek, it's a single outpouring of praise. It's structured around the three persons of God: what the Father planned, what the Son accomplished, and what the Spirit guarantees. And three times, Paul says it all leads to the praise of God's glory.

The headline is this: God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ, in the heavenly realms. Not some. Every. If you belong to

Jesus, you're not waiting to get the important blessings later. You already have them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Heavenly Realms**
>
> This phrase appears five times in Ephesians and nowhere else in Paul's letters. It doesn't just mean heaven as the place you go when you die. It means the unseen spiritual world that exists alongside ours, where Christ now reigns, where believers already belong, and where spiritual powers still oppose God. Paul's point is that what happens in the unseen world is real, and that in Christ you're on the winning side.

So what are these blessings? Paul starts with the biggest one. God chose us in Christ before He even created the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight. Before there was a single star, God had you in mind.

And in love He planned to adopt us as His children through Jesus. The NIV footnote explains that the word for adoption to sonship is a legal term for the full standing of an adopted heir in Roman culture. In Rome, an adopted son had every right a natural son had. His old debts were cancelled. He got a new name and a full share of the inheritance. Girls and guys alike, Paul says, that's you.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Chosen?**
>
> Paul's words about God choosing and predestining people have led to centuries of discussion. Some Christians, often called Reformed or Calvinist, believe God chooses specific individuals for salvation. Others, often called Arminian, believe God chose in advance to save all who would trust Christ, knowing ahead of time who they would be. Still others emphasize that Paul is talking about God choosing a people, the church, in Christ. What everyone agrees on is that salvation starts with God, not with us, and that Paul says this to make his readers worship, not worry.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **In Love**
>
> The NIV footnote on verses 4 and 5 points out that the phrase in love could go with the end of verse 4 (holy and blameless in His sight in love) or with the beginning of verse 5 (in love He predestined us). Ancient Greek had no punctuation, so translators have to decide. Either way, love is at the center of God's choosing.

Next, Paul says, in Christ we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. God didn't just sprinkle grace on us. He poured it out, lavishly, like someone who doesn't care about the cost. Redemption means being set free by the payment of a price, like buying back a slave or ransoming a prisoner. The price was Jesus' own life.

Then Paul reveals God's big plan, which he calls the mystery of His will. When the time is right, God will bring everything in heaven and on earth together under Christ. The world feels broken into a million pieces: nations at war, families split apart, people divided by race, money, politics, and pride. God's plan is to gather all of it back together, with Jesus as the head.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Mystery**
>
> When we hear mystery, we think of a puzzle or a detective story. But in the Bible, a mystery is a secret that God has kept hidden and now reveals. It's not something you figure out by being clever. It's something God tells you. Paul uses the word six times in Ephesians, and in chapter 3 he explains exactly what the mystery is.

Paul then turns to his readers. You also, he says, were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth and believed. And when you believed, you were marked with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sealed**

In the ancient world, a seal was a stamp, often carved into a ring, pressed into wax or clay. It showed who owned something, guaranteed it was genuine, and protected it from being tampered with. Merchants in Ephesus would seal their goods before shipping them. Paul says the Holy Spirit is God's seal on you. You belong to Him. You're the real thing. And He's protecting you until you arrive.

The Spirit is also a deposit, a down payment, guaranteeing our inheritance. The same word was used for a first payment that promised the rest was coming. The Spirit's presence in your life now is a taste of the full life with God that's still ahead.

Then Paul switches from praise to prayer. Ever since he heard about their faith in Jesus and their love for all God's people, he hasn't stopped thanking God for them. And he keeps asking God to give them the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that they will know Him better.

Notice what Paul doesn't pray for. He doesn't ask for their problems to disappear or for them to get more stuff. He prays that the eyes of their hearts would be opened. He wants them to really see three things: the hope God has called them to, the riches of God's inheritance in His people, and the incredible power God has for those who believe.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Eyes of Your Heart**

In the Bible, the heart isn't just your feelings. It's the center of who you are: your thinking, choosing, loving, and believing. When Paul prays for the eyes of the heart to be enlightened, he means for God to help people see what's true, not just know it in their heads. You can know facts about God and still not see Him. Paul wants them to see.

What kind of power is Paul talking about? The same power God used to raise Jesus from the dead and seat Him at His right hand. Jesus is now far above every ruler, authority, power, and dominion, and above every name anyone could call on, now and forever. For people in Ephesus who were afraid of spirits and fate and magic, that was huge news. Whatever power you're afraid of, Jesus is above it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Every Name**
>
> In Ephesus, people called on the names of gods, spirits, and powers in magic spells, believing that knowing a name gave you power over it. Some magical texts from the ancient world list long strings of names. Paul says Jesus is above every name that could ever be invoked. You don't need a secret word or a charm. You have Jesus.

God placed everything under Jesus' feet, Paul says, and made Him head over everything for the church. And the church is His body, the fullness of the One who fills everything. Think about that. The Jesus who rules the universe has chosen to fill and work through ordinary people like you, in an ordinary local church.

KEY VERSE

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Ephesians 1:3 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says God had you in mind before He created the world. How does that change the way you see yourself?
2. Which blessing in this chapter means the most to you right now: being chosen, adopted, forgiven, sealed, or something else?
3. What are you afraid of? How does it help to know that Jesus is above every power?
4. Paul prays for the eyes of their hearts to be opened. Who could you pray that for this week?

TRY THIS *Read Ephesians 1:3–14 out loud and make a list of everything it says God has given you in Christ. Keep the list where you'll see it.*

CHAPTER 2

Dead Made Alive

Ephesians 2

If chapter 1 is the mountaintop, chapter 2 starts in the valley. Paul doesn't sugarcoat where we started. You were dead, he says, in your sins and wrongdoing.

Dead is a strong word. Not sick, not confused, not a little off track. Dead. A dead person can't help themselves. They can't make better choices or try harder. And Paul says that's what we were, spiritually.

He describes three forces that once controlled us. First, the ways of this world, the patterns everyone around us follows without thinking. Second, the ruler of the kingdom of the air, a way of describing the devil, the spirit at work in those who are disobedient. Third, our own flesh, its cravings and desires and thoughts. And Paul includes himself. All of us lived that way, he says. By nature, we deserved God's anger.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Flesh**
>
> The NIV footnote says that in contexts like this one, the Greek word sarx, flesh, refers to the sinful state of human beings, often presented as a power opposed to the Spirit. It doesn't mean your body is bad. God made your body, and Jesus had one. It means the part of us that wants to live without God, our self-centeredness and our pull toward sin.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Ruler of the Air**

Many people in the ancient world believed the air between the earth and the moon was full of spirits, some good and many evil. Paul uses that language to describe Satan's influence. He isn't saying the devil controls the weather. He's saying there's a real, invisible enemy who influences people and cultures. The good news, as chapter 1 already said, is that Jesus is seated far above every one of those powers.

Then comes one of the greatest turns in the Bible. "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy," made us alive with Christ even when we were dead. It's by grace you have been saved.

Two words change everything: but God. We were dead, but God. We were helpless, but God. We deserved judgment, but God. The story doesn't end with what we did. It ends with what God did.

And He didn't just make us alive. He raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms. That's past tense. If you belong to Jesus, in God's eyes, you're already sitting with Him. Why did God do it? So that for all the ages to come, He could show off how rich His grace and kindness are. You are, in a way, God's exhibit of grace.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Grace**

Grace means a gift that's undeserved. In the Roman world, the word was used for a gift given by a patron, a wealthy person who supported others, often expecting loyalty in return. Paul takes that word and fills it with new meaning. God's grace isn't a loan to be paid back. It's love given to people who have nothing to offer and don't deserve it.

Then Paul writes the verses many Christians memorize first. It is by grace you've been saved, through faith. And even that isn't from you. It's God's gift, not a reward for works, so nobody can boast.

This is the same message as Galatians, but calmer. You can't earn God's love. You can't add to what Jesus did. Faith isn't a work that earns salvation, like a ticket you buy. It's more like an empty hand that receives a gift. And because it's all a gift, nobody gets to brag. Not the church kid, not the pastor, not the person who seems to have it all together.

But Paul doesn't stop there. Good works matter. They're just not the root. They're the fruit. We are God's handiwork, Paul says, created in Christ to do good works that God prepared in advance for us to do.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Handiwork**
>
> The Greek word is poiema, which is where we get the English word poem. It means something made, a work of art or craftsmanship. Some translations say workmanship or masterpiece. You're not a random product. You're something God designed and crafted on purpose. And the good things you'll do in life aren't a way to earn His love. They're part of the design. He already has them planned.

The second half of chapter 2 shifts focus. Paul reminds the Gentile believers what they used to be. They were called uncircumcised by Jewish people. They were outside the people of Israel, strangers to God's covenants and promises. Paul sums it up in a heartbreaking phrase: without hope and without God in the world.

But now, through Jesus' blood, those who were far away have been brought near. Jesus Himself is our peace. He has made Jews and Gentiles one, and He has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Dividing Wall**
>
> In the temple in Jerusalem, there was a stone barrier separating the outer court, where Gentiles could go, from the inner courts, which only Jewish

people could enter. The Jewish historian Josephus says warning signs in Greek and Latin were posted along it. In 1871, a complete Greek one was found. It warns that any foreigner who goes past the barrier will have only himself to blame for the death that follows. Paul knew that wall well. In fact, he was arrested in Jerusalem after being accused of bringing a Gentile from Ephesus, a man named Trophimus, past it (Acts 21:29). That may be part of why he's in prison as he writes.

Jesus didn't just let Gentiles in through a side door. Paul says He created one new humanity out of the two, making peace, and reconciled both groups to God in one body through the cross. Through Him, both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

That's revolutionary. In Paul's world, the divide between Jews and Gentiles was one of the deepest there was. Today, we have our own dividing walls: race, nationality, class, politics, popularity. Paul says the cross destroys them all. Not by making everyone the same, but by making everyone family.

BACKGROUND CHECK **One New Humanity**

Paul doesn't say Gentiles became Jews, or that Jews became Gentiles. He says God made something new. The church isn't meant to be a club for one kind of person. It's meant to be a preview of what God is doing with the whole world: bringing every kind of person together under Jesus. When a church is made up of only one kind of people, it's missing part of the picture.

So, Paul concludes, you're no longer foreigners and strangers. You're fellow citizens with God's people, members of His household. And then he uses a building picture. The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. The whole building is rising to become a holy temple. And together, you're becoming a home where God lives by His Spirit.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Cornerstone**

In ancient buildings, the cornerstone was the first stone set in place, often a large, carefully cut stone at the corner of the foundation. Every other stone was lined up with it, so it determined the shape of the whole building. Jesus is the stone everything else lines up with. The Temple of Artemis was one of the most magnificent buildings on earth. Paul says God is building something even more magnificent, made of people.

KEY VERSE

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says we were dead, but God made us alive. Why do you think he starts with such bad news before the good news?
2. If salvation is a gift, why do so many people still feel like they have to earn God's love?
3. What dividing walls do you see at your school or in your town? What would it look like for the church to tear them down?
4. You're God's handiwork. What good works might God have prepared for you to do, even this week?

TRY THIS *Write the words "but God" at the top of a page. Underneath, write a few things from your life that were hard or broken, and how God showed up, or ask Him to.*

CHAPTER 3

Wider Than You Think

Ephesians 3

Paul starts to pray at the beginning of chapter 3. He gets as far as for this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles, and then he stops himself. He interrupts his own prayer to explain something, and he doesn't get back to the prayer until verse 14. Paul's mind sometimes ran faster than his sentences.

Notice how he describes himself. Not a prisoner of Rome, but a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Paul believed that even his chains were part of God's plan. He was in prison because he preached that Gentiles could belong to God's people without becoming Jewish. So in a sense, he was in chains for them.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul's Chains**
>
> In Rome, Paul was under house arrest, probably chained by the wrist to a soldier who was rotated in shifts. That meant Paul could never be alone, but it also meant that every few hours a new soldier had to sit and listen to him pray, dictate letters, and talk about Jesus. In Philippians 1, Paul says that the whole palace guard had heard why he was in chains. God was using his prison as a pulpit.

Now Paul explains the mystery he mentioned in chapter 1. He says God revealed it to him, and that it wasn't made known to earlier generations the way it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets. And here it is. Through the gospel, the Gentiles are

heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Together**
>
> Paul uses three Greek words in a row that all start with syn, meaning together: co-heirs, co-body, and co-sharers. He even seems to invent one of them. It's as if regular words weren't enough to express how completely Gentiles and Jews now belong to each other in Christ. The Old Testament prophets had promised that the nations would one day come to Israel's God. What nobody saw coming was that they would come as equal members of the family.

Paul says he became a servant of this gospel by God's grace. Then he says something surprising about himself: he is less than the least of all God's people. Paul was a former persecutor of the church, and he never forgot it. But grace was given to him anyway, to preach the boundless riches of Christ to the Gentiles.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Less Than the Least**
>
> Paul made up a word here. He took the Greek word for least and added a comparative ending, creating something like leaster. It's bad grammar on purpose. It's a little like saying you're the most least person ever. Paul wasn't being falsely modest. He genuinely knew he didn't deserve what God had given him, which is exactly what grace means.

God's plan, Paul says, was that through the church His wisdom, in all its many colors, would be displayed to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. Think about that. The invisible powers watch the church, and what they see is God's wisdom. When people who would naturally hate each other become a family, it's proof that God's way works.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Manifold Wisdom**

The word translated manifold means many-sided or many-colored. It was used for a richly embroidered cloth or a bouquet of flowers. God's wisdom isn't one plain color. It's like a tapestry woven out of every nation, language, personality, and story. A church full of different kinds of people is a picture of that.

Because of Christ, Paul says, we can approach God with freedom and confidence. In the ancient world, you couldn't just walk up to a king. You needed permission, a reason, and the right connections. In Christ, you have access to the King of the universe any time. So, Paul says, don't be discouraged by my sufferings. They're for your glory.

Now Paul finally returns to his prayer, and it's one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible. He kneels before the Father. (Jewish people usually stood to pray, so kneeling may show how deeply Paul felt this.) The Father, he says, is the One from whom every family in heaven and on earth gets its name.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Every Family**

The NIV footnote points out a wordplay in Greek: the word for family, patria, comes from the word for father, pater. Paul is saying that God is the original Father, and every family takes its name and meaning from Him. Whatever your own family is like, good, hard, broken, or blended, God is the Father your heart was made for.

Here's what Paul asks for. First, that God would strengthen them with power through His Spirit in their inner being. Second, that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith, settling in and making Himself at home. Third, that, rooted and established in love, they would have power, together with all God's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

And fourth, that they would know this love that goes beyond knowledge, so they would be filled with all the fullness of God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Rooted and Established**
>
> Paul mixes two pictures. Rooted is a farming image, like a tree with deep roots that can survive a storm. Established is a building image, like a house on a solid foundation. Both are about stability. When your life is rooted in Christ's love, you don't get blown over as easily by what people think, what you feel, or what happens to you.

Notice that Paul prays for them to grasp Christ's love together with all the Lord's people. You can't fully understand the love of Christ on your own. You need other believers, people who have experienced His love in ways you haven't, to help you see more of it. And notice the paradox: Paul wants them to know a love that surpasses knowledge. You'll never reach the end of it. But you can keep exploring it forever.

Then Paul bursts into praise again. To Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power working in us, be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.

Whatever you can imagine God doing in your life, He can do more. Not a little more. Immeasurably more. That's not a promise that you'll get everything you want. It's a promise that God's plans for you are bigger than yours.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Doxology**
>
> A doxology is a short burst of praise, usually at the end of a prayer or a section. The word comes from the Greek doxa, glory, and logos, word. Paul's letters are full of them. Ephesians 3:20–21 marks the end of the first half of the letter. Everything after this is about how to live in light of what God has done.

> The order matters. Paul doesn't tell you what to do until he's told you who you are.

KEY VERSE

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Ephesians 3:20–21 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul calls himself a prisoner of Christ, not of Rome. How could seeing a hard situation as part of God's plan change the way you handle it?
2. Why do you think God chose to show His wisdom through the church, with all its imperfections?
3. Which part of Paul's prayer in verses 16 to 19 do you most need right now?
4. Paul says we need other believers to grasp the love of Christ. Who has helped you understand God's love better?

TRY THIS *Pray Paul's prayer from Ephesians 3:16–19 for someone you know, using their name. Then pray it for yourself.*

CHAPTER 4

Grow Up Together

Ephesians 4

Chapter 4 is a turning point. For three chapters, Paul has told his readers who they are and what God has done. Now he says: so live like it. As a prisoner for the Lord, he urges them to live a life worthy of the calling they've received.

Worthy doesn't mean you have to earn your calling. You already have it. It means your life should match it, the way a person who has been given a scholarship to a great school would want to show up and do the work. Paul is saying: you're God's children, so act like family.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Therefore**
>
> Paul's letters often have a hinge where he moves from what God has done to how we should live. In Romans, it's at the start of chapter 12. In Ephesians, it's here. Bible teachers like to say that when you see a therefore, you should ask what it's there for. Paul's instructions in chapters 4 to 6 only make sense because of chapters 1 to 3. Christian living is a response to grace, not a way to get it.

What does a life worthy of the calling look like? Paul starts with attitudes: be completely humble and gentle, patient, putting up with one another in love. And make every effort to keep the unity the Spirit has created, held together by peace.

Notice that Paul doesn't tell them to create unity. The Spirit already did that. Their job is to keep it, to guard it. And that takes effort, because people are annoying, and we're annoying too.

Then Paul lists seven ones. One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. In a city full of temples to many gods, and in churches full of people from different backgrounds, Paul says what unites believers is far deeper than what divides them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Humility**
>
> In the Greek and Roman world, humility wasn't considered a virtue. It was seen as weakness, the attitude of a slave. Strong people were supposed to be proud and seek honor. Christians changed that. Because Jesus, the King of the universe, humbled Himself, humility became something beautiful. Being humble doesn't mean thinking you're worthless. It means not needing to be the center of attention.

But unity doesn't mean everyone's the same. Paul says each of us has been given grace in a particular measure, the way Christ chose to give it. Then he quotes Psalm 68, about a conquering king going up on high, taking captives, and giving gifts.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Received or Gave?**
>
> The NIV footnote says Paul is quoting Psalm 68:18. But in the Hebrew of the psalm, the king receives gifts from people. Paul says He gave gifts. Why the change? An ancient Aramaic paraphrase of the psalm also reads gave, so Paul may be following a known Jewish interpretation. Or Paul may be making a point: a victorious king receives tribute and then distributes it to his people. Either way, Paul applies it to Jesus, who rose and ascended and now pours out gifts on His church.

Paul adds a short aside: if Jesus ascended, He must also have descended first, to the lower, earthly regions. The NIV footnote

offers another possible translation: the depths of the earth. Some think Paul means Jesus coming down to earth as a human being. Others think he means Jesus going down to the realm of the dead after His death. Either way, the One who came down is the same One who went up above all the heavens, to fill the whole universe.

What gifts did Jesus give? People. He gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. And their job isn't to do all the ministry themselves. It's to equip God's people for works of service, so that the whole body grows strong.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Equip**
>
> The Greek word for equip was used for setting a broken bone, mending a fishing net, and outfitting a ship for a voyage. Pastors and teachers are like coaches. A coach doesn't play the game for the team. A coach trains the players so they can play. If you're a Christian, you're on the team. Your church needs what God has given you.

The goal, Paul says, is maturity. He wants the church to grow up into the full measure of Christ. Then they won't be like babies tossed around by waves and blown here and there by every new idea, or fooled by clever, deceitful people. Instead, speaking the truth in love, they'll grow up in every way into Christ, the head.

Speaking the truth in love is one of the most practical phrases in the Bible. Truth without love is harsh. It hurts people. Love without truth is weak. It lets people walk off a cliff. Jesus was full of both. And growing up means learning to do both at the same time.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Body**
>
> Paul loves the picture of the church as a body. Every part matters. Every ligament holds something together. When each part does its job, the whole body grows and builds itself up in love. A body where only the head and

mouth work is in big trouble. A church where only the pastor does anything is too.

Then Paul gets specific. You must not live like the Gentiles anymore, he says, meaning the pagans around them. Their thinking is futile, their understanding darkened, and they're cut off from God's life because their hearts have become hard. Having lost all sensitivity, they've given themselves over to every kind of impurity and greed.

That's not how you learned Christ, Paul says. You were taught to take off your old self, like a filthy set of clothes, to be made new in the attitude of your mind, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Put Off, Put On**

The picture is changing clothes. In some churches of the following centuries, people being baptized took off their old clothes before going into the water and put on new white robes afterward. Paul's point is that following Jesus isn't just stopping bad habits. It's replacing them. You don't just stop lying; you start telling the truth. You don't just stop stealing; you start giving. Empty spaces don't stay empty.

Then Paul gives examples. Stop lying, and tell your neighbor the truth, because we belong to each other. Then he quotes Psalm 4: "In your anger do not sin." Don't let the sun go down while you're still angry, and don't give the devil a foothold.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Anger**

Paul doesn't say anger is always wrong. The NIV footnote notes that he's quoting Psalm 4:4 from the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Jesus Himself got angry at injustice. But anger is like a fire. It can warm a house or burn it down. Paul's advice is to deal with it quickly, before bedtime, before it turns into bitterness. Unresolved anger is an open door for the enemy.

Anyone who has been stealing should stop and get a job, so they'll have something to share with people in need. Notice the goal isn't just to stop taking. It's to start giving.

Don't let any rotten talk come out of your mouth, Paul says. Only say what builds others up and helps them. That includes texts, comments, group chats, and jokes at someone else's expense. Words can destroy or build. And don't grieve the Holy Spirit, the One who sealed you for the day of redemption. The Spirit is a person who can be hurt by how we treat each other.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Unwholesome Talk**
>
> The word Paul uses means rotten or decayed, like spoiled fruit or rotten fish. It's the kind of talk that makes everything around it worse: gossip, insults, crude jokes, and constant complaining. Paul's test is simple: is what you're about to say helpful for building someone up? If not, maybe don't say it, or post it.

Paul finishes the chapter with a list of things to get rid of, bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice, and then one of the most beautiful commands in the Bible.

KEY VERSE

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 4:32 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says the Spirit has already created unity; our job is to keep it. What makes keeping unity hard in a church or friend group?
2. Are you more likely to speak truth without love, or love without truth? What would it look like to do both?
3. Is there someone you're angry with right now? What would it look like to deal with it before the sun goes down?
4. Think about your texts, posts, and comments from the last week. Would they pass Paul's test of building others up?

TRY THIS *For one day, try a words fast: before you say or post anything, ask yourself whether it's true, kind, and helpful. Notice how often you change your mind.*

CHAPTER 5

Children of Light

Ephesians 5

Paul starts chapter 5 with an amazing command: imitate God. Be like Him, the way dearly loved children copy their parents. Little kids watch everything their parents do: how they talk, walk, laugh, and react. Paul says, watch your Father. Copy Him. And the main thing to copy is love, the kind Christ showed when He gave Himself up for us.

Then Paul gets very direct about sex and greed. Among God's people, he says, there shouldn't be even a hint of sexual immorality, impurity, or greed. And no obscenity, foolish talk, or crude jokes. Instead, thanksgiving.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Is Paul So Blunt?**
>
> In the Roman world, sexual behavior that Christians considered wrong was common and widely accepted, especially for men. Temple festivals, banquets, and public entertainment often included it. So when Paul tells Gentile believers to live differently, he isn't being prudish. He's saying that God's people have a new identity, and that God's design for sex, within the covenant of marriage between a husband and wife, is part of the new life. Paul links greed and sexual immorality because both treat people and things as objects to consume.

Notice that Paul puts thanksgiving as the opposite of crude talk. Gratitude and coarse joking come from two different places. One

sees people and the world as gifts. The other treats them as jokes or objects.

Don't let anyone fool you with empty words, Paul warns. You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. So live as children of light. Light produces goodness, righteousness, and truth. Figure out what pleases the Lord. And don't take part in deeds of darkness, but expose them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Darkness and Light**
>
> Paul doesn't say you used to be in darkness. He says you were darkness. And now you are light. It's not just about where you are. It's about who you are. Light doesn't have to try hard to shine. It shines because it's light. When you live as who you really are in Christ, people will see it.

Then Paul quotes what may be an early Christian hymn, perhaps one sung at baptisms: "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

So, he says, be careful how you live. Not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. The phrase making the most of means buying up, like a shopper grabbing a bargain before it's gone. Every day is full of opportunities to do good. Don't waste them.

Don't get drunk on wine, Paul says, which leads to wild living. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. That's an interesting comparison. Being drunk means being under the influence of alcohol. Being filled with the Spirit means being under the influence of God. And the results are very different.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Filled with the Spirit**
>
> In Greek, be filled is a command in the present tense, which suggests something ongoing: keep on being filled. It's not a one-time experience. Paul

then describes what a Spirit-filled life looks like: speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; singing to the Lord from the heart; always giving thanks to God for everything; and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Being filled with the Spirit shows up in worship, gratitude, and how we treat each other.

That last point, submitting to one another, leads into one of the most discussed passages in Paul's letters. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Mutual submission. Everyone puts others first. Then Paul applies that principle to three relationships in the household: wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Household Rules**

Greek and Roman writers, like the philosopher Aristotle, wrote rules for managing a household. They addressed the male head of the house and told him how to rule over his wife, children, and slaves. Paul uses the same three relationships, but with surprising changes. He speaks directly to wives, children, and slaves, treating them as people with their own relationship to God. And he puts heavy responsibilities on husbands, fathers, and masters, limiting their power and calling them to serve.

Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord. In some of the oldest Greek manuscripts, verse 22 doesn't even have its own verb. It borrows submit from verse 21, so it reads something like: submitting to one another, wives to your husbands. Paul says the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.

But then he turns to husbands, and he spends much more time on them. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. That's not about being the boss. That's about laying down your life. Jesus led by washing feet and going to the cross. Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies,

caring for them and providing for them the way Christ cares for the church.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Reading 5:21–33 Today**

Christians read this passage in different ways. Some, often called complementarians, believe husbands and wives are equal before God but have different roles, with the husband called to loving, sacrificial leadership and the wife to respecting and supporting that leadership. Others, often called egalitarians, believe Paul was working within the household structures of his day while planting seeds of equality, and that mutual submission in verse 21 is the principle for marriage today. Both views agree on the main points: husbands and wives are equally loved by God, and marriage should reflect the self-giving love of Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Never an Excuse for Abuse**

This passage has sometimes been twisted to excuse cruelty or control. That's the opposite of what it says. A husband who hurts, threatens, or controls his wife is disobeying it, not following it. Christ's love protects; it never abuses. If anyone in your home is being hurt or is afraid, that's not something you have to keep quiet about. Tell a trusted adult, a teacher, a counselor, or a pastor.

Paul quotes Genesis 2, about a man leaving his father and mother and becoming one flesh with his wife. Then he says this is a profound mystery, but he's really talking about Christ and the church. Marriage, at its best, is a living picture of how much Jesus loves His people. He ends with a summary: each husband must love his wife as himself, and each wife must respect her husband.

KEY VERSE

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 5:1–2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What does it look like, practically, to imitate God the way a child imitates a parent?
2. Paul links gratitude and pure speech. Why do you think thankfulness changes the way people talk?
3. What's the difference between being under the influence of something else and being filled with the Spirit?
4. What do you think mutual submission looks like in a family, a friendship, or a church?

TRY THIS *Make the most of every opportunity this week. Each morning, ask God to show you one person you could encourage, help, or include, and then do it.*

CHAPTER 6

The Armor of God

Ephesians 6

Paul continues with the household relationships. Next: children and parents. Children, obey your parents in the Lord, because it's right. He quotes the commandment, Honor your father and mother, and points out that it's the first one with a promise attached: that things will go well with you and you'll enjoy long life.

That one's for you, so let's be honest. Obeying your parents isn't always easy, especially as a teenager, when you're becoming more independent and starting to see their flaws. But Paul says it's part of following Jesus. Honoring your parents means respecting them even when you disagree.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **In the Lord**
>
> Paul's words to children include the phrase in the Lord. That suggests obeying parents is part of obeying Jesus, not a replacement for it. If a parent ever asked a child to do something clearly wrong or harmful, obedience to God comes first. But in ordinary life, Paul expects children to listen to their parents, and honoring them is something you keep doing even as an adult.

Then Paul turns to fathers, and the NIV footnote says the word can also mean parents. Don't exasperate your children, he says. Don't provoke them to anger or discourage them with harshness, unfairness, or impossible expectations. Instead, bring them up in

the training and instruction of the Lord. In the Roman world, a father had nearly total power over his children. Paul limits that power and calls fathers to gentle, patient teaching.

Then Paul addresses slaves and masters. He tells slaves to obey their earthly masters sincerely, with respect, as if they were serving Christ, and not just when they're being watched. He reminds them that the Lord will reward everyone for the good they do, slave or free. Then he tells masters to treat their slaves the same way, to stop threatening them, and to remember that they have the same Master in heaven, who doesn't play favorites.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Slavery in Paul's World**

Slavery in the Roman Empire was common; by some estimates, somewhere between one in ten and one in five people was enslaved. Unlike slavery in the Americas, it wasn't based on race. People became slaves through war, debt, kidnapping, or birth, and many were eventually freed. But it was still slavery. Enslaved people could be beaten, sold, separated from their families, and sexually abused, with little protection under the law.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Does the Bible Approve of Slavery?**

Paul's words here are not an endorsement of slavery. He was writing to people who couldn't change the system, telling them how to live faithfully within it. But he also planted ideas that would eventually undermine it: that slaves and masters are equal before God, that masters answer to a higher Master, and, in Galatians 3:28 and Philemon, that a slave is a brother in Christ. Elsewhere Paul encourages slaves to gain their freedom if they can (1 Corinthians 7:21), and 1 Timothy condemns slave traders. Sadly, some later Christians twisted these verses to defend slavery. But many Christians, including leaders of the movements to end the slave trade and slavery in Britain and America, were driven by the Bible's teaching that every person bears God's image. Today, these verses are often applied to work: do your job honestly, and if you're ever in charge of others, treat them with respect.

Then Paul reaches his final word, and it's a call to battle. Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so you can stand against the devil's schemes.

Why armor? Because, Paul says, our struggle isn't against flesh and blood. Our real enemies aren't people. They're the spiritual forces of evil behind the brokenness of the world. That's important. The person who hurt you, the person who disagrees with you, even the person who opposes your faith, isn't your ultimate enemy. They're someone Jesus loves and wants to rescue.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Schemes**

The word for schemes is where we get the English word method. The devil's attacks are usually not dramatic. They're strategic: a lie repeated until you believe it, a temptation that seems small, a discouragement that grows over time, a division between friends. Paul doesn't want believers to be paranoid, but he does want them to be alert.

Paul describes six pieces of armor. He may have had a Roman soldier in mind, maybe even the one he was chained to. But he was also thinking of the Old Testament. In Isaiah 59, God Himself puts on righteousness as a breastplate and salvation as a helmet. The armor Paul describes is God's own armor, which He gives to His people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Armor, Piece by Piece**

The belt of truth held a soldier's tunic and gear in place, so he could move freely. Without truth, everything falls apart. The breastplate of righteousness protected the heart and vital organs, like living right protects you from many wounds. The shoes were a soldier's sandals, sometimes studded with nails for grip, ready for the gospel of peace, so you can stand firm and move where God sends you. The shield of faith was a large shield that could cover the whole body; some think soldiers soaked their leather-covered shields in water before battle to put out flaming arrows. Faith puts out the devil's burning lies.

> The helmet of salvation protected the head, your mind and identity. The sword of the Spirit, God's word, was a short sword for close combat, the only offensive weapon in the list. Jesus used Scripture to answer the devil when He was tempted in the wilderness.

Notice two things. First, most of the armor is defensive. The goal is to stand. Paul says stand four times in this passage. You don't have to win the war; Jesus already did that. Your job is to hold the ground He has won. Second, Paul's instructions are plural. Roman soldiers fought in formation, shields locked together. You aren't supposed to stand alone. You stand with your church.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Standing Together**
>
> Roman soldiers were trained to fight as a unit. When they locked their shields together, front and overhead, in a formation sometimes called the tortoise, they could advance under a rain of arrows. One soldier alone was vulnerable. A line of soldiers together was nearly unbreakable. The same is true for Christians. Faith is personal, but it was never meant to be private.

And then, the final weapon: prayer. Pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests. Stay alert and keep praying for all of God's people. And Paul asks them to pray for him, too, not for his release, but that he'd have the right words and the courage to proclaim the gospel fearlessly. He calls himself an ambassador in chains. Ambassadors were normally protected and honored. Paul, Christ's ambassador, was chained up. But he was still on duty.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Tychicus**
>
> Paul says Tychicus will tell them all his news. Tychicus was from the province of Asia, and he traveled with Paul (Acts 20:4). He carried this letter and probably the letter to the Colossians as well. Imagine walking hundreds of miles carrying letters that would one day be read by billions of people.

Tychicus wasn't famous, but he was faithful. Paul calls him a dear brother and faithful servant. That's not a bad way to be remembered.

Paul's final words are a blessing of peace, love, and faith, and then grace for everyone who loves Jesus with an undying love. The NIV footnote offers another possible reading: grace and immortality to all who love our Lord. Either way, the letter that began with grace ends with grace.

KEY VERSE

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

Ephesians 6:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's one way you could honor your parents this week, even if you disagree with them about something?
2. Paul says our struggle isn't against flesh and blood. How would it change things if you saw the people who frustrate you as people Jesus wants to rescue, not as enemies?
3. Which piece of the armor of God do you most need right now? Why?
4. Why do you think Paul ends a letter about God's power with a call to prayer?

TRY THIS *Every morning this week, as you get dressed, go through the armor of God in your mind, piece by piece, and ask God to help you stand. Then pray for one friend by name.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's letter to the Ephesians. At its center is one of the clearest explanations of the gospel in the whole Bible, in chapter 2. It goes from dead to alive, from far away to brought near, from strangers to family. All because of God's grace.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He chose to love you.

Paul says God planned, before the world was even created, to adopt people as His children through Jesus. You're not an accident. You're His handiwork.

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

Paul doesn't say we were sick or confused. He says we were spiritually dead. And God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 God stepped in.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. Because of God's huge love and mercy, He brings dead people to life.

> *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.* **Ephesians 2:4–5 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for good behavior. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus. Nobody gets to brag.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. When you do, God seals you with His Spirit and brings you into His family.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself, and I can't earn Your love. I believe Jesus died for me and that You raised Him from the dead. Thank You for Your*

great love and mercy. I'm turning to You. Forgive me, make me alive, and bring me into Your family. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Fill me with Your Spirit and help me live as Your child. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Ephesians 1 to 3 again and underline everything God says you are in Christ. Then read Philippians, the next letter in the New Testament.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. You've been made part of one body, and you need the others. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Pray in the Spirit on all occasions, Paul says. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, the love of Christ is bigger than anything you've imagined, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.

Ephesians 6:24 (NIV)