

RICHARD COEKIN
EPHESIANS
FOR YOU



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COMPANY

Ephesians For You

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centred
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Ephesians For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **grey** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

To my beautiful daughters, Charlotte, Rhiân and Annabel, who each bring me more joy than they can possibly understand.

*“The joy of the LORD is your strength”
(Nehemiah 8:10)*

Bible translations used:

- NIV: New International Version, 2011 translation (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)
- NIV84: New International Version, 1984 translation
- ESV: English Standard Version

INTRODUCTION TO EPHESIANS

Ephesians is a spectacular **epistle**. Both times that I've preached through it over the last decade, it has profoundly reformed and united our church under God, and especially rekindled our reverence for Christ. I am not surprised that the great theologian, **John Calvin**, treasured it above all others. *Ephesians for You* has no other agenda than to introduce you to what Paul teaches in this biblical masterpiece.

Ephesians is packed with stunning passages, every chapter yielding fresh treasures. The epic explosion of praise for our blessings in Christ (Ephesians 1:1-14) deepens our appreciation of God's almighty rule; the celebration of God's amazing grace in raising us from death to life in Christ (2:1-10) humbles and moves us to worship him; the mind-blowing dimensions of the love of Christ (3:14-19) provides us with a new sense of security in him; the church-growth strategy of Bible teachers preparing all God's people for ministry (4:1-16) can mobilise our whole churches; the glorious description of marriage (5:22-33) will get us excited about heaven; and the climactic call to stand firm in Jesus' "armour" of gospel convictions (6:10-20) will clarify any confusion about spiritual warfare. Digging up these spiritual treasures will not only enrich your life but increase your confidence in sharing them with others.

Such glorious passages have proved ideal for private devotions and group discussions as part of our church's discipleship programme, just as much as for public preaching. Properly understood, this epistle is God's spiritual remedy to radically improve the spiritual health of your church and every ministry within it.

Paul's own Introduction

Ephesians begins with the author introducing his own letter:

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:1-2*)

The author identifies himself as the **apostle**[†] Paul. The evidence points to the great missionary and church-planting apostle writing this letter from prison, probably in Rome, in about AD 61-62. He describes himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus”, emphasising that he writes as one of Christ’s authorised and empowered witnesses to proclaim the eternal and cosmic will of God, which we will find set out in Ephesians.

Paul addresses his letter to “God’s holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus” (v 1). The earliest manuscripts don’t include the name of Ephesus. Since the letter is general in style, without any reference to local people or issues, it seems likely this was a circular letter written for all the churches in the region (now western Turkey), which had been planted from Ephesus, where Paul had been senior pastor for 2½ years.

We know from Acts 19 that Ephesus was cosmopolitan and commercial: a **pagan** city devoted to the temple of the Greek goddess Artemis. This would explain the great emphasis in this letter on Christ’s supremacy over the devil and demonic powers. Paul calls his readers: “the faithful in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:1), because this letter especially celebrates the blessings of living together “in Christ”, by faith in him.

Paul wishes them “grace and peace” (v 2)—combining both customary Gentile and Jewish greetings—because these will be massively important themes in this letter. He will celebrate God’s “grace” as his undeserved kindness and the origin of all our blessings in Christ (eg: 1:6; 2:7). And “peace” is the summary of all the blessings resulting from being reconciled to God and to each other in Christ (eg: 2:14, 15, 17). If grace is the *origin* of God’s plan to gather us into the blessings of his church in Christ, then peace is the *result* of it which demonstrates in the spiritual realms the triumphant wisdom of the gospel of Christ crucified.

* All Ephesians verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

† Words in **grey** are defined in the Glossary (page 213).

The Structure and Message of Ephesians

The letter neatly divides into two halves of three chapters each (for a fuller outline, see the Appendix). Chapters 1 – 3 focus on gospel doctrine. They proclaim God’s cosmic plan to unite everything under Christ (chapter 1), by reconciling us to God and each other by his death and resurrection (chapter 2), through the proclamation of the revealed mystery of the gospel of Christ crucified for all nations, which is displayed in the spiritual realms in the church (chapter 3).

Then chapters 4 – 6 focus on church practice. They call us to respond by preserving our unity under Christ. This is done by continuing to gather people under Christ by preparing each other for ministry, growing in maturity, and speaking the truth in love (chapter 4) in order to be made new in our minds and living distinctive Christ-honouring lives in the church, in the home and at work (chapter 5). The climactic finale of the letter calls readers to stand firm in the armour God has given them in the gospel against the lies of Satan, which threaten to divide us from God and each other; and to keep on praying in the Spirit for world mission—which is victory in spiritual warfare in our churches (chapter 6).

There are five distinctive emphases and phrases in Ephesians that reflect Paul’s message:

1. The problem of sin and judgment, and its remedy in Christ, are not like in Romans, presented as unrighteousness deserving wrath and needing **justification** through faith in Christ. Rather, in Ephesians “sin” means to be spiritually dead in a slavery that alienates us from God and excludes us from his people—for which the remedy is reconciliation to God and his people in Christ.
2. The gospel is presented as the “mystery” of God, previously hidden but now revealed, through which people of all nations can be reconciled to God and included in the new humanity in Christ.
3. The “heavenly realms” are the spiritual and eternal dimensions in which Christ has already been resurrected and enthroned in glory

over Satan and all his powers—the realm in which the church now displays the triumphant wisdom of God in the gospel of Christ crucified, as people from all nations gather under the word of Christ, standing firm against the lies of the devil, protected by the armour of gospel convictions.

4. “Church” is far more important to God than just a useful vehicle for collecting disciples. Each local church is an earthly expression of the heavenly gathering which is his personal inheritance; the body, building and bride of which his Son is the head, cornerstone and husband; the trophy cabinet of his saving grace; and the demonstration of the triumphant wisdom of the cross to his enemies in the heavenly realms.
5. All our blessings are “in Christ”; he is not only the means of our blessing, but the One we live in, for we are united by faith to him and share in his resurrection victory over Satan, sin and death.

The mind-blowingly encouraging central message of Ephesians is this: God’s eternal cosmic plan is to “bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (1:10), who is already raised in triumph to rule over all evil powers for the safety of his church. This church is reconciled to God and each other through his death and resurrection; and the “mystery of the gospel” (6:19) is that people of all nations can share in the marvellous blessings of Christ so that, “now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (3:10), as the trophy cabinet of his saving grace. So in learning to be made new in our thinking to live as children of light in the world, we will be protected from the assaults of the devil’s lies by standing firm in the convictions of the gospel, as we keep on praying and evangelising the world.

However ordinary we may feel, every local church that works together to teach the gospel of Christ is proclaiming the victory of his death and resurrection in the spiritual realms. Your church matters enormously to God—and so Ephesians is definitely for *you*!

1. EVERY BLESSING

In this glorious passage, the apostle Paul launches an avalanche of praise for God. In the original Greek, it's one long, breathless sentence. He begins by summarising what he's so excited about: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us" (1:3). Even though Paul is chained up in prison (6:20), he feels incredibly blessed—and he wants his Christian readers, then and now, to realise how incredibly privileged we are as well. He summons the praise of our hearts towards God, because God deserves it—and because articulating our blessings helps us to enjoy them all the more.

Where are these Blessings?

The privileges that provide such comfort and reassurance to a believer, even in the midst of trials and troubles, are found "in the heavenly realms" (literally "heavenlies"—1:3). This is a crucial phrase that Paul repeats five times in Ephesians, and which we need to grasp if we are to understand the letter.

The heavenly realms are the spiritual dimension in which God and all spiritual powers are dwelling. They are not just heaven (for evil powers exist in the heavenly realms, but not in heaven), and not earth (for this is not a matter of flesh and blood), and not the future (for we wrestle with our spiritual enemies in the heavenly realms now—6:12). The "heavenly realms" means *the spiritual dimension*:

- (a) where we have already been blessed (1:3)
- (b) where Jesus has been enthroned for ever over all evil powers (v 20)
- (c) where we have already been raised to be seated with Christ (2:6)

- (d) where the victory of Christ over evil powers at the cross is spiritually demonstrated in one church gathering under Christ, displayed in the unity of our earthly church gatherings under his word (3:10)
- (e) where we need to stand firm against the spiritual assaults of the evil powers by praying for the fearless proclamation of the gospel to all nations (6:10-20).

Put simply, we are blessed in the “heavenly realms” through sharing in the resurrection of Christ!

The blessings Paul is speaking about are not the trivial and temporary trinkets of wealth and property, or even of him being released from prison, but the eternal treasures of personal reconciliation with God which we experience in this spiritual dimension. They belong to all Christians from the time we first trust in Christ. And although we can't enjoy them as fully now as we shall one day enjoy them in glory, they fill our hearts with joy even now.

The stunning word here is “every” (**1:3**). Each believer has received in Christ every possible spiritual blessing from God. None are being withheld. Christians will have different gifts and different ministries and different circumstances, but we all possess every spiritual blessing in Christ. We can safely ignore anyone offering us their special way to extra blessings, because we already have them all in Christ. And we need never feel less blessed or more blessed than another believer. God has given each Christian everything to enjoy in eternity.

But what are “spiritual blessings”? They are benefits that the Holy Spirit applies to our experience of knowing God in the spiritual dimension. So, although we must take up our cross to follow Jesus, ready to suffer for the salvation of others (Mark 8:34), we are always at the same time experiencing the blessings of sharing in the resurrection of Christ, and looking forward to an extravagant abundance of joy in arriving home to be with him in the renewed creation.

How do we access such blessings? Very simply, they are found completely and only “in Christ” (Ephesians **1:3**). Eleven times in this marvellous sentence that runs from **verse 3** to **verse 14**, we're

reminded of all we have “in Christ” (or “in him” or “through him” or “under him”) by faith in him (**v 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12** and twice in **v 13**). God wants us to remember that we owe everything to his Son. We’re blessed not just “through” Christ, as the mechanism for getting blessed, but personally “in” Christ, to whom we are united by faith. These are his fabulous resurrection blessings, and we enjoy them if we have turned to trust in him.

If we have a friend who owns an exciting sports car, although we can admire it from a distance, we only really enjoy it when we are racing along the motorway in the car with them. In the same way, Christ shares his privileges with those who are with him—like a driver with his passengers, a commander with his troops, or a husband with his wife. We’ve been blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heavenly realms “in” him. And all we will have to do to finally experience them fully is... die. Even I can manage that!

Well, what would you think are the greatest blessings of being a Christian? We can summarise the apostle Paul’s sensational top three blessings under the following headings:

- 1.** Being chosen for adoption by the Father (**v 4-6**)
- 2.** Being redeemed for unity by the Son (**v 7-10**)
- 3.** Being sealed for inheritance by the Spirit (**v 11-14**)

Surprised by his top three? I guess we will never be as excited as he is until we properly understand them. So let’s unwrap these presents and find out why these are such fabulous blessings.

Chosen by God

Long before we ever chose to follow Jesus, God the Father “chose us” (**v 4**)! This is called the “election” of believers or the “predestination” (**v 5**) of our futures. Many Christians find this hard to understand. Some think it’s cruel. Why on earth would Paul think this was our top spiritual blessing?

Yet the great nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote: “Election sets the soul on fire with enthusiastic delight in God”. And, like all the great **Reformed theologians** and theological statements, the **Anglican 39 Articles of Faith** declare: “The godly consideration of predestination and our election in Christ is full of sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort to godly persons.” Are you surprised?

Most importantly, Jesus himself plainly taught election and predestination as part of the good news of the gospel—for instance: “All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37). He’s saying that no one can be saved unless the Father has chosen to give them to Jesus.

It’s helpful to realise that God’s election of sinners for salvation is simply the exercise of God’s universal **sovereignty** in our human arena, because he is the one “who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Ephesians **1:11**). Indeed, whenever we pray, we are acknowledging that God is in control. And whenever we pray for God to save someone, we’re unconsciously recognising that God, with his sovereign control, must elect people for salvation if they are ever to be saved. We instinctively understand that sinners cannot become Christians unless God chooses to save them. But we may struggle with the idea that God chooses some and not others for salvation for at least three reasons. God choosing people can seem to:

- undermine **evangelism** (“God will certainly save his elect, so there’s no need for us to bother too much with telling people about Jesus”)
- undermine humility (“We’re superior—because we’re the chosen ones”)
- undermine holiness (“We don’t need to strive to please God because once saved, always saved”).

These are serious and understandable concerns. But Paul’s careful explanation of election here gently answers each of these anxieties.

First, being chosen by God shouldn't diminish the importance of evangelism because: "He chose us in him" (v 4), and how do sinners come to him? "You also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel" (v 13). It is through the preaching of the gospel of Christ that God calls his elect into Christ. God uses our evangelism to save his elect. Indeed, if God hadn't elected anyone for us to call through the gospel, there would be no point in us trying to evangelise sinners, because they're spiritually dead (2:1). But since God has elected many, we evangelise everyone, in the confidence that he can involve us in reaching his elect!

So election is actually a great motivation *for* evangelism! It's what we hear in Jesus' encouragement to Paul to keep preaching the gospel in Corinth "because I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:10). Churches should pray confidently and then evangelise urgently,

precisely because God has chosen many for salvation "in Christ". If he hadn't done so, our evangelism would be pointless. Since he has chosen many, our evangelism is the joyful privilege of finding his elect with his gospel, like miners digging for gold in a pit.

Second, being chosen by God shouldn't diminish our humility because we were chosen "before the creation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4). We're not saved because we turned out to be cleverer or more deserving than other people. The decision was made long before we were even born—before God even created the world. Being "chosen" should humble us by reminding us that we're not more deserving than our atheist or Muslim friends. If we had chosen God without him first choosing us, then we could be proud of our wisdom. Since he first chose us, we should only ever be humble—our salvation was entirely his gracious initiative.

Third, our election shouldn't diminish our enthusiasm for holiness, because we were chosen "to be holy and blameless in his

Evangelism is the joyful privilege of finding God's elect with God's gospel.

sight” (v 4). Far from undermining holiness, we’ve been chosen to be accepted by God as holy and blameless on the basis of the holy and blameless life lived for us by Jesus. And then, in gratitude for being saved, we’re called to gradually become holy and blameless like him. Because we’ve been chosen to play for the highly privileged “Holy and Blameless Team”, captained by Jesus, we will want to become holy and blameless like him. Election is a reason to be holy! Especially when you hear what we’re chosen for...

Chosen for Adoption

“In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ” (v 4-5). Sinners are not naturally God’s children. But with incredibly generous love, God has chosen us in Christ for rebirth and adoption into God’s family. Despite how unlovely we are, in the great torrent of affection he has poured out upon us, God has not just predestined us to become his servants, but his sons! He has chosen to unite us with his Son by faith to enjoy his Son’s privileges.

We therefore enjoy the tender love of our heavenly Father, carefully providing our daily needs, pardoning our sins, protecting us from unhelpful harm, disciplining us in the way we should go, and showering us with undeserved kindnesses. We enjoy our heavenly Father’s constant attention to our prayers, for he’s never sleepy or forgetful, never grumpy or uninterested, never powerless to help or unsure of what to do. Indeed, in Christ we are brought right into the family of the **triune** God himself, able to whisper in the ear of our Father!

Moreover, as adopted sons, we enjoy the comfort of God’s global people gathered in church families. We will generally find that when we cry out in distress, he doesn’t remove us from our suffering, but brings brothers and sisters from our church family into our troubles, to carry us when we’re too weak to stand up ourselves.

And as adopted sons, we share in the inheritance of the Son. So we shall each receive a glorious inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, in the Son’s eternal kingdom. This is why Paul describes

all Christians—women and men—as “sons”. In the Old Testament, it was the firstborn sons of Israel who inherited land, because God was teaching us about our faith, which shares in the glorious inheritance of his own firstborn Son, who would inherit everything (Psalm 2). So by faith in God’s Son, men and women alike are adopted by the Father to share in Jesus’ inheritance. (Indeed this was familiar to Paul’s Gentile readers because in the first-century Greco-Roman world, slaves in childless households were sometimes adopted to inherit the family estate.) What an incredible privilege it is for us now to be chosen for adoption by God the Father to inherit a share of his Son’s glorious estate in heaven! The great theologian J.I. Packer writes:

“You sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one’s holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much [they make] of the thought of being God’s child and having God as [their] Father.” (*Knowing God*, page 224)

The Spiritual Solar System

We often find election hard to swallow because we don’t really think that those who aren’t chosen will deserve God’s judgment (which usually reveals that we don’t really think that we deserve judgment either). But understanding that we have been chosen for adoption turns our world upside down in a wonderful way. It’s a spiritual “Copernican revolution”.

Nicholas Copernicus was the sixteenth-century astronomer who discovered that the sun doesn’t rotate around the earth, but that our planet rotates around the sun. The sun is the centre of the solar system, and not our world. Likewise, as sinners we like to think that God and the world rotate around us. We arrogantly question whether to allow God to have any part in our world and our future. But election turns this worldview completely upside down; it recognises that we are hell-deserving sinners, and so the question is whether God could choose to allow us any part in his world in his future!

As we struggle to get our minds around God's sovereign electing grace, it's helpful to think of becoming a Christian as being like walking through a narrow door (this illustration is based on one in Harry Ironside, *In the Heavenlies: Ephesians*, pages 27-28). On the front of the door is painted the words of Jesus' gracious universal invitation: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). When we walk through the door and look back at it from the inside, we read the comforting reassurance of his sovereign election: "In love he predestined us for adoption" (Ephesians **1:4-5**).

When we arrive in heaven, God will welcome us, and we can imagine him saying: *I am so glad to welcome you into my home at last—for I chose to save you for my Son before I made the world; I sent my Son to die for you on the cross; I arranged history to ensure your birth and steer your life; I brought someone to explain the gospel to you and opened your eyes to recognise Jesus as your Saviour and Lord; I carried you when you were weak and held on to you when you tried to run away; and now, finally, I can welcome you into my home. It is so good to see you—I've loved you for such a very long time!*

Here is the mind-blowing top blessing of faith in Christ: we have been chosen for adoption by the Father.

Questions for reflection

1. "God has given each Christian everything to enjoy in eternity." How does this excite and comfort you today?
2. Did you relate to any of the concerns raised regarding predestination on page 14? How did the answers to them help you think of God's election as good news?
3. Re-read the penultimate paragraph on this page. Meditate on what God has done for you and how he sees you if you are "in Christ". How does it make you feel?