

# Ephesians: Grace Changes Everything

## *Part 1. Introduction*

The book of Ephesians stands out as one of the most theologically rich and practical letters in the New Testament. This letter serves not only as a guide to the Ephesian believers but also as a timeless message for the entire church, both then and now. It is a call to recognize and embrace the overwhelming grace and spiritual blessings we have received in Christ, and to live in a manner that reflects these truths in every aspect of our lives.

As we embark on this sermon series we will explore the depths of teaching in this incredible letter, not merely for intellectual understanding, but for life transformation. In this introductory sermon I want to provide an overview of the book, helping us to frame our journey ahead by understanding the context, purpose, themes, and practical application of this remarkable epistle.

### **The Author and Recipients**

The letter to the Ephesians is traditionally attributed to the Apostle Paul, as indicated in the opening verse: *"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God."* (1:1) Paul wrote this letter during his imprisonment in Rome, which gives it the title of a *'Prison Epistle'* (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, were all written from prison).

The recipients of this letter are described as *"God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus"* (1:1). While the letter is addressed to the church in Ephesus, some early manuscripts omit the phrase *"in Ephesus,"* which has led many scholars to conclude that this letter was actually intended to be circulated among the various churches in the whole region, not just Ephesus.

Ephesus, a major city in Asia Minor, was known for its wealth, trade, and religious diversity. It was home to the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, which made it a hub for pagan worship. The Ephesian church was established during Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 19), and it flourished in this city despite the challenges of its surrounding culture.

Paul's relationship with the Ephesian church was deep and personal. He spent more than two years ministering there, teaching both Jews and Greeks about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:10). His heart for these believers is evident in his writing, as he desires for them to fully grasp the magnitude of their new identity in Christ and the spiritual riches that come with it.

### **Purpose of the Letter**

Unlike some of Paul's other letters, Ephesians does not appear to address specific problems within the church, such as the false teaching dealt with in Galatians or the divisions found in 1 Corinthians. Instead, Ephesians reads more like a general manifesto on Christian living and the nature of the Church. It is a letter that celebrates the unity of believers in Christ and encourages them to live in a manner worthy of their calling. Paul's purpose in this Epistle is fivefold:

1. **Reveal the mystery of the gospel:** Paul emphasizes the mystery that was hidden for ages but is now revealed in Christ. This mystery is that both Jews and Gentiles are united as one body in Christ (3:6).

2. **Remind believers of their spiritual blessings:** Paul begins the letter with a doxology of praise, reminding the Ephesians of the incredible spiritual blessings they have in Christ, such as adoption, redemption, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit (1:3-14).
3. **Encourage unity and love:** A major issue in this letter is unity in the body of Christ. Paul calls for believers to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace, recognizing that there is *“one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”* (4:4-5)
4. **Call for holy living:** Paul transitions in the second half of the letter to practical exhortations, encouraging believers to live out their new identity in Christ. This includes living with integrity, kindness, and love, while rejecting immorality, greed, and deceit (4:17-5:21).
5. **Prepare believers for spiritual warfare:** The letter concludes with a powerful passage on the armour of God, reminding believers how they have already been equipped in Christ to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. (6:10-18)

## Five Key Themes in Ephesians

### 1. The Riches of God’s Grace

From the very outset, Paul emphasizes the vast riches of God’s grace that have been lavished upon believers. In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul delivers a sweeping summary of the blessings that come from being in Christ, reminding the believers that they have been chosen, redeemed, forgiven, and sealed by the Holy Spirit. He declares, *“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us.”* (1:7-8) This theme of grace runs throughout the letter. Perhaps most famously, Ephesians 2:8-9 teaches that salvation is by grace through faith: *“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.”*

For Paul, grace changes everything! The grace of God is not only the basis for our salvation, but it is also the foundation for how we live each and every day. Grace is the empowering presence of God, which enables us to love, forgive and walk in humility and righteousness. This theme will be a central point in each sermon as we unpack the incredible generosity of God’s grace towards us.

### 2. The Unity of the Church

Unity in the body of Christ is another dominant theme in Ephesians. Paul stresses that the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles has been torn down in Christ, and both groups are now united as one people. He writes, *“His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace.”* (2:15)

This unity is not merely ethnic but also spiritual. Believers are called to be united in faith, hope, and love. Paul’s call for unity is grounded in the truth that there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all (4:4-6). This unity is a testament to the reconciling power of the gospel, and Paul urges believers to *“make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”* (4:3)

### 3. The Church as the Body of Christ

Ephesians presents one of the most profound pictures of the Church in the New Testament: The Church as the body of Christ. Paul writes, *“And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”* (1:22-23)

This metaphor of the Church as Christ's body carries significant implications for how we view ourselves and our relationship with one another. Each believer is a vital part of the body, and Christ is the head. We are interconnected and dependent on one another, each fulfilling different roles and functions within the body. This idea will be explored further as we consider the gifts that God has given to the Church to equip and build it up (4:11-16).

#### **4. Walking Worthy of Our Calling**

Paul spends the first three chapters of Ephesians laying out the theological foundations of the gospel, but in the latter half of the letter, he turns to practical application. In Ephesians 4:1, Paul urges the believers to *"live a life worthy of the calling you have received."* This calling is the high calling of being a follower of Christ, and it demands a life that reflects the character of God.

The call to holy living is not a call to legalism or self-righteousness, but rather a response to the grace we have received. It is a call to put off the old self and submit to the new self, as we are created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (4:22-24). This transformation affects every area of our lives - our relationships, our speech, our work, and our attitudes and conduct. In the coming sermons, we will explore what it means to walk in love, light, and wisdom (5:1-21).

#### **5. Spiritual Warfare**

Ephesians concludes with a vivid and sobering reminder that we are engaged in a spiritual battle. Paul writes, *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."* (6:12) He then exhorts the believers to *"put on the full armour of God"* so that they can stand firm against the devil's schemes (6:11).

The armour God has given us in Christ: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the Word of God, and prayer - equips us for this spiritual warfare. We will unpack this imagery further and deal with some deceptive teaching which has accompanied this passage for many years now.

#### **Application for Today**

As we embark on this journey through the book of Ephesians, it is crucial to recognize that the themes and truths presented in Ephesians are not merely ancient ideas but are deeply relevant for us today. The church in Ephesus, much like the modern church, lived in a world full of spiritual and cultural challenges. Yet, Paul's message to them is also God's message to us: we have been richly blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ, and we are called to live in light of these truths. Here are some ways we can apply the key themes of Ephesians to our lives today:

##### **1. Embracing Our Identity in Christ**

One of the primary messages of Ephesians is the believer's identity in Christ. Paul wants us to understand that we are chosen, adopted, redeemed, and sealed by the Holy Spirit (1:4-14). This identity is not based on our performance but on God's grace. In a world where people often struggle with questions of self-worth and identity, Ephesians reminds us that our true identity is always and only found in Jesus Christ.

We must constantly remind ourselves that we are not defined by our past, our failures, or even our successes. We are defined by what God says about us in Christ. This truth should shape how we view ourselves and how we live out our faith. When we know who we are in Christ, we can walk confidently in the world, knowing that we are deeply loved and secure in Him.

## **2. Living in Unity**

In a time when divisions, both inside and outside the church, seem to be at an all-time high, the call for unity in Ephesians is as timely as ever. Whether it's racial, political, or theological divisions, the Church is not immune to the forces that seek to tear apart relationships and communities. Paul's call for unity is grounded in the gospel, which tells us that we have been reconciled to God and to one another (2:14-18). As the body of Christ, we are called to reflect the unity of the Spirit, even in the midst of diversity. This means pursuing peace, bearing with one another in love, and making every effort to maintain the bond of peace (4:2-3).

In practical terms, unity requires humility, patience, and a commitment to love others as Christ has loved us. It means choosing to forgive when we've been wronged and working toward reconciliation in our relationships. The unity of the Church is a powerful testimony to the world of the reconciling power of the gospel, and it is a theme we will explore throughout this series.

## **3. Walking in Holiness**

The call to live a life worthy of our calling (4:1) challenges us to examine our daily conduct and how it aligns with our new identity in Christ. Holiness is not about following a set of rules or achieving moral perfection; it is about being transformed by the Spirit of God and living in a way that reflects the character of Christ within us.

As we move through Ephesians, we will see that holy living affects every area of our lives - our speech, our actions, our relationships, and even our thoughts. In a culture that often promotes selfishness, greed, and immorality, Paul's words in Ephesians 4:22-24 are a reminder that we are called to put off the old self and be renewed in the attitude of our minds. We are to embrace the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. This transformation is not something we accomplish on our own; it is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. As we seek to walk in holiness, we must rely on the Spirit's power and daily surrender to His leading. In this series, we will learn how to practically live out our faith in a way that honours God and reflects His holiness to the world around us.

## **4. Standing Firm in Spiritual Warfare**

The reality of spiritual warfare is often overlooked or misunderstood in the modern church, yet Ephesians 6 reminds us that we are in a battle - not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of evil (6:12). Paul's exhortation to put on the full armour of God is not just a metaphorical concept; it is a practical guide for how we can stand firm in our faith amid spiritual opposition.

In today's world, the enemy's tactics are often subtle, and the pressures of culture, temptation, and fear can easily lead us astray if we are not vigilant. Paul's instruction to stand firm by daily embracing truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, and the Word of God will be essential in equipping us to live victorious lives in Christ.

As we study the armour of God in the final sermons of this series, we will explore this important metaphor in more detail. The battle is real, but God has already provided everything we need to stand firm. Our victory is not in our strength, but in the power of God working in and through us.

## **Conclusion**

The letter to the Ephesians is a profound invitation to explore the riches of God's grace and to live out the implications of our identity in Christ. It offers us a glimpse into the mind of Paul, who is not only a theologian but a pastor at heart, desiring that the church grows in spiritual maturity, unity, and holiness.

Over the course of this sermon series, we will journey through each chapter, uncovering the depths of Paul's teaching and applying it to our lives today. We will learn about the incredible blessings we have in Christ, the power of God's grace, the unity of the Church, the call to holy living, and the reality of spiritual warfare.

As we prepare to dive deeper into this letter, let us be open to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Let us embrace our identity in Christ, pursue unity with one another, walk in holiness, and stand firm in the face of spiritual battles. Together, we will discover that grace changes everything as the empowering presence of God, in Christ, equips us to live lives which are worthy of the calling we have received.

Let us prepare our hearts for the journey ahead as we explore the riches of God's grace in Ephesians. Let's pray together:

*Heavenly Father, we thank You for the incredible grace You have lavished on us through Christ. As we begin this journey through the book of Ephesians, open our hearts and minds to receive the truths You want to teach us. Help us to embrace our identity in Christ, to walk in unity and holiness, and to stand firm in the spiritual battles we face. Show us Lord how to fully embrace the armour you have given us and empower us to live lives that bring glory to You. May this teaching series deepen our faith and strengthen our walk with You. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.*