

City of Wisdom

Displaying God's "plan"
to the powers.

Study Guide

City of Wisdom: Displaying God's "Plan" to the Powers.

The church today is the continuation of the Covenant Family that God first established with Abraham back in Genesis 12. God made a promise to Abraham about 4,000 years ago to build a great nation through him and his wife Sarah. That began with their son Isaac and advanced through Isaac's children, including Jacob, whom God renamed Israel. The nation of Israel took shape many years later at Mt. Sinai after God rescued the Jews that had been enslaved by Egypt under Pharaoh for 400 years. It was at Mt. Sinai, about 3,000 years ago, that God called these former slaves His people... His new Covenant Family... who then received the blessing and promise God had made to Abraham, explaining that this promise was now for them.

What then ensued were journeys, a resettling, kings, victories over neighboring nations, and eventually conquest by neighboring nations and captivity/exile. During this time, Israel remained children of God's Covenant Family, but they were inconsistent in adherence to the covenant they had with their God. 2,000 years ago, they remained Israel but they were scattered and ruled over by another nation (Rome); yet, they remained God's Covenant Family. Then, everything changed. Jesus came as predicted by the Old Testament prophets who said a Messiah would come to be the King and establish God's new Kingdom as home for His Covenant Family. And, this family was now open to all people who recognized and pledged allegiance to the King – Jew and Gentile. Jesus lived, died and rose from the dead so that God's Covenant Family could receive the Holy Spirit and join together as sons and daughters, citizens of the new Kingdom and subjects of the King. This is the backdrop of Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. And Paul's message: You are a part of God's Covenant Family!

Part 1 of our new sermon series looks at Paul's explanation in Ephesians 1-3 of how the Gospel story led to the start of the church. In Part 2 (Winter 2027), we will look at Ephesians 4-6 and what living as the church looks like. Paul's writing guided the Ephesians and is intended to guide us as well. What to look for in this series: What does it mean to be the church? What was God's intent then and now for this "family" of many diverse people to come together and be unified into a new society governed by God's will and ways, destined to live eternally in His Kingdom under King Jesus? And why is it God chose this path – the church – as the way to advance His plan and bring about the completion of our salvation, sanctification and reconstitution in His renewed creation?

Here is the sermon schedule for Part 1 of our study in Ephesians this Fall:

September 13:	Introduction to the Sermon Series (no study)
September 20:	Study #1 - Ephesians 1:1-3
September 27:	Study #2 - Ephesians 1:4-10
October 4:	Study #3 - Ephesians 1:11-14
October 11:	Study #4 - Ephesians 1:15-23
October 18:	Study #5 - Ephesians 2:1-7
October 25:	Study #6 - Ephesians 2:8-10
November 1:	Study #7 - Ephesians 2:11-16
November 8:	Study #8 - Ephesians 2:17-22
November 15:	Study #9 - Ephesians 3:1-7
November 22:	Study #10 – Ephesians 3:8-13
November 29:	Study #11 – Ephesians 3:14-19

Study #1: Ephesians 1:1-3

1. Paul visited the city of Ephesus in about 52 AD, roughly 10 years before he wrote this letter while in a prison in Rome. The visit was part of Paul's third missionary trip. Read Acts 19:1-10. What strikes you as significant in what guided Paul to stop and then remain in Ephesus for so long a period of time to establish the church there?

2. We read in Acts 18:24-28 that a Jew named Apollos had come to Ephesus prior to Paul's visit, and Apollos, who was knowledgeable of the Old Testament, taught "boldly" in the synagogue about the way of Jesus. There is no mention of the starting of a church as a result of Apollos' teaching during his time there. What appears to have been his focus, and why do you suppose a Christian "church" did not form as a result of his work – what was missing?

3. As a result of Paul's efforts in Ephesus, a church formed and grew, but not without challenges. Reading Acts 19:21-41, what conflict(s) arose? How did conflict(s) get resolved? What does this suggest to you about the "fragility" of the early Christian church?

4. Paul departed Ephesus after his roughly 2-year stay (Acts 20:1). What happened in Ephesus during the timeframe between 52 AD, when Paul departed, and 62 AD when he

wrote this letter? Initially, Priscilla and Aquila carried on Paul's work there. Eventually, Paul asked Timothy to lead the church at Ephesus. Read the opening to 1 Timothy and scan the section headings of that letter. What issues was Paul counseling Timothy to deal with in his role as leader of that church?

5. In Ephesians 1:1-3, Paul opens his letter in what is seen as his typical style. Considering his reputation in Ephesus, having started the church 10 years earlier and his on-going ministry work that the Ephesians likely heard about, why do you suppose Paul is so formal and clear about who he is, what he is and God's calling on him? Why do you think this is important for any church that receives "visitors" and/or outside teaching?

6. We see in the Old Testament's recorded history how God guided and protected His Covenant Family. Jesus was sent to establish the New Covenant Family, made possible by His sacrifice, defeat of death, resurrection, and then sending the Holy Spirit to those who claimed His promise and acknowledged His kingship. How do you see God at work in continuing to guide and protect His Covenant Family?

Background and Other Considerations:

- Through the Book of Acts and the writing of letters by Paul (this letter and his two letters to Timothy), we have learned about the early Ephesians church – how it formed and how it was instructed to function in line with the teachings of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Fast-forwarding about 30 years, the Apostle John wrote Revelation. In Revelation 2:1-7, John reveals what the Lord told him about the status then of the church at Ephesus. Read this passage and note the issues that this church faced.
- Acts 19 says that when Paul first visited Ephesus, he encountered a few people who claimed to be followers of Christ. After a little probing, Paul learned that they knew/participated in the baptism by John (for repentance and forgiveness of sins) but not the baptism into Jesus which included the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Paul promptly fixed that! This started the Christian church at Ephesus. By the time Paul wrote his letter to this church, scholars estimate the city of Ephesus to be about 200,000-250,000 people, and the Christian church in the city to be around 100 members. Where this gets fuzzy is around the fact that the “church” met in homes in groups of 10-30 people (gatherings of 30 were rare since homes were not large and it would be conspicuous, leading to possible persecution). Also, while Ephesus as a city was relatively large, the region of Asia in which Ephesus was located, was also a target of Paul’s during his stay in Ephesus. Therefore, it is likely that there were home churches in the regions immediately surrounding the town of Ephesus.
- Some of the ancient manuscripts found have no city name filled in (v.1), leading scholars to the idea that the letter is a circular; i.e., it was written to many cities and towns in the region. As a circular, it was intended to be more general (e.g., not citing particular names or very specific issues) but still containing relevant guidance and teaching for the churches Paul started throughout Asia.
- As we go further into Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, you will notice a pattern in Paul’s references to God. He has a propensity to describe God’s trinitarian nature without calling it out specifically using the word “trinity”. Look at v.3 in chapter 1. Paul calls our “God our Father” and associates the Father to His Son Jesus, the Christ, and then points out that, through Jesus, we have “every spiritual blessing.” In one verse, mention of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The ESV Study Bible calls out other examples: 1:11-13, 1:17, 2:18, 2:22, 3:2-5, 3:14-17, 4:4-6, and 5:18-20.
- The body of Paul’s letter begins at v.3 with the words “Blessed be...” This opening was a very common beginning in Jewish letters and speeches at that time. The Greek word used is *eulogetos* which means to speak well of or praise. We get the word eulogy or eulogize from this Greek term. Paul continues from v.3 all the way to v.14, with a grand, run-on sentence praising God and recognizing what He did for us through the ministry of His Son.
- In v.3, Paul refers to our hope of a special gift: spiritual blessings in the heavenly places. While, for now, the Holy Spirit enlivens us with its presence to teach, guide and empower. When Jesus comes again, we will obtain new resurrection bodies and be fully enabled with all the spiritual blessings God intends to bestow upon His children to fully enjoy the new creation (heavenly places).

1. In this passage (vs.3-10) Paul declares to the Ephesians all that God has blessed them with. Read this passage and focus on each use of the words “us” or “we”. List what Paul says is theirs (the Ephesian believers), and now ours, because of God’s blessing on us and the work of Jesus on our behalf.

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4. Paul states a major theme for his letter to the Ephesians, which is also a major purpose for the church: praise for a gracious and glorious God. The church is also about discipleship and serving the world but why is our praise (worship) so important to God, and to us?

5. Why is God's "grace" so fundamental to our relationship to Him and to our identity as His church? In what ways does the church model grace so that the world can "see" this part of God's nature through us?

6. Another key theme in Paul's letter to the Ephesians is mentioned in v.10, that being God's plan to unite all things in heaven and on earth through Jesus. Paul tells the Ephesians that they are a part of that plan. What do you understand "uniting all things in heaven and earth" to mean?

7. God's plan focuses on and revolves around the Messiah; how does this bring greater significance to Jesus' role as King? How do we, as members of His church, help God realize His plan for unity?

Background and Other Considerations:

- Paul was a very well-educated man, being a Pharisee and pupil of the renowned Jewish teacher Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). As such, Paul was very familiar with the story of Israel and God's rescue of them from Egypt. He also fully understood the Jewish laws concerning adoption, both in his time as well in ancient Israel. Paul equates the status of Israel as God's "firstborn" with "adoption as sons" in Romans 9:4.
- In the time of Paul in the Greco-Roman world, adoption of a "son" was a legal process that had considerable legal meaning, especially when it came to passing along the estate holdings of the adopting father. Daughters were also adopted but these arrangements did not carry the same significance as such arrangements were commonly made to seal contracts and/or establish political alliances. The adoption of a son meant that the son now had the same status as a biological heir. Paul is deliberate in his analogy of calling out the Ephesians, male and female, as having the new status of adopted "sons" because all believers are now full heirs in the household of God's Covenant Family.
- Words used by Paul, such as *elected*, *chosen*, or *predestined* (Ephesians 1:4-5), were used in the context here by John Calvin to promote the notion that those who are Christians are pre-determined by God for salvation – it is not a choice people make. Non-Calvinist scholars state the following arguments against this notion:
 - o God chose a group (i.e., the church) for salvation. It is like God choosing a passenger train. He predestined the train to arrive at a safe destination; anyone can board that train as long as they acquire a "ticket" which they get by coming to Jesus.
 - o God chose Jesus to be the "elect One". We each choose Jesus and then share in His election which grants us, by grace, His salvation. Eph. 1:4 says "God chose us in Him..."
 - o Paul says believers were chosen to be holy and blameless (Ephesians 1:4). Just as God chose Israel as His "firstborn" as a nation (all who left Egypt and arrived at Mt. Sinai) to be in His Covenant Family. Now the church of Jesus' followers are adopted into that Covenant Family.

It is by an individual's choice that s/he comes to accept Jesus' offer of salvation; God has predestined from before time began that this choice would be available to all humanity.

- The Old Testament historical stories are designed to inform humanity about God's plan for His creation. Genesis 1 describes how God made everything and, in Genesis 1:28-31, He reveals that it is specifically for us – we are to have dominion over this creation and to tend/care for it. The story of Abram/Abraham points to the beginning of the Covenant Family. The story of Israel in captivity within Egypt and God's rescue presents a foreshadowing of how God intended to rescue a doomed humanity through the Gospel of Christ. The collection of stories around the nation of Israel rising to dominance, reaches a pinnacle under King David and then his son Solomon. However, Israel's dominance then faded due to their straying from God's ways and will, losing His favor to the point of being conquered and brought back into captivity by neighboring nations. The minor prophets explained that Israel reaped what they sowed and earned their decline. Hope was nearly extinguished. But, as the captives in Egypt did, the Jews raised their voices to God and begged their God to rescue them yet again. The long-hoped-for Messiah came, revealed that His Kingdom was indeed at hand, and He became the Passover sacrifice (during the Passover in Jerusalem) to effect the rescue we all needed. In His rising victorious from the tomb, death was conquered and the new King ascended to His throne. When the King sent the promised Holy Spirit, life was given to the church, His Covenant Family members. When He returns, final judgment will come to those who rejected Him. For His followers, resurrection and the new earth and heavens will be established for His bride, the church, to enjoy for eternity, praising Him forevermore.

Study #3: Ephesians 1:11-14

1. In v.5, Paul reminds the Ephesians that they are now “adopted sons”. As heirs, Paul explains in v.11 that the Ephesians (and we) are now promised an “inheritance”. What do you understand that to mean, what do you understand that to include and when do you understand that to be obtainable?

2. A few years before this letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans in which he explained what it meant to be an heir with Christ. Read Romans 8:12-17. What does Paul say here about this new status, that of being joint heirs with Jesus? What strikes you about this truth?

3. When you compare our Ephesians passage with the Romans 8 passage, what do they say is the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives? Have you sensed the Spirit working in this role in your own life? Explain.

4. Paul frames the inheritance God has promised us by describing it as being provided “in Him”, i.e., through Jesus. An analogy of this is seen in the Old Testament story of King David adopting the son of His close friend Jonathan, who was Saul's son. Read 2 Samuel 9. In this story, David learns that Mephibosheth is all that remains of Jonathan's family and David then

seeks to show kindness to honor Jonathan. In essence, David adopts Mephibosheth. What do you note in this story that connects with the adoption Paul says we have in Christ? How does inheritance show up in this story, and how is it symbolic of the inheritance we now have in Christ?

5. In v.13, Paul says we have been *sealed* with the promised Holy Spirit. What do you understand that to mean? What significance does the use of this word (sealed) have in the message Paul is conveying to the Ephesians, and now to us?

6. How does living as one who is adopted and as one who has the guarantee of an out-of-this-world inheritance change your perspective each day? Is this spiritual truth worth remembering as you start each day? Explain.

Background and Other Considerations:

- The instructions God gave ancient Israel for the tabernacle/temple included the provision of a table on which the showbread was laid (Exodus 25:23-30). The showbread, also called the Bread of Presence (literal translation: "bread of the face") or shewbread, was laid out each week by the priests as two stacks of bread totaling 12 loaves representing the 12 tribes of Israel. It was a visual reminder of God's generosity and a channel of His abundance and prosperity. It could be said that it was/is a symbolic picture of the inheritance we are to fully receive when we are reunited with God as a result of Jesus' second coming. Some say that the bread in our communion sacrament is our "showbread", reminding us of His presence in us through the Holy Spirit. How does this relate to our passage? In v.11, Paul explains that God has arranged for us to receive the inheritance in Christ "according to the purpose of Him..." The Greek word used for "purpose" is *prothesin* which is the same word assigned to the Hebrew word for "showbread". The connection made here is to the "purpose" of the showbread (described above) and His "purpose" revealed in His plan for us. His goal is for His people to be in His presence, receiving His blessings and recognizing Him for all that He is with praise of His glory.
- Paul writes in Ephesians 1:3-14 about God's "purpose" and "will". In his commentary, *The Vision of the Ephesians*, NT Wright emphasizes how important this is in the development of Paul's message to the Ephesians and to us. Wright says Paul is clearly not advocating that Christians are about "getting to heaven", a view of Christianity that Wright claims is all too prevalent in western society. Instead, he says Paul is stating clearly that God's purpose, for His people and the church, is to display His presence to the world. We are now the showbread and we are not to just sit on a table in the temple. We are the proof of God's work of grace and love, not just because of salvation, but through the life we now have through His Spirit in us. Following the teaching and example of Jesus, revealed and enabled by the guiding and power of the Spirit, we are to demonstrate to the world what genuine humanness looks like, a preview (not perfect yet) of what the new earth is to look like when all creation is restored and renewed at the time Jesus returns. God is a God of love and grace, and God's church reveals this by how we interact with each other and the world. Wright says this message is about the purpose of the church right now, a message Paul will continue to reveal we dig deeper into the Letter to the Ephesians in the coming weeks.

1. In this passage, Paul expresses thanksgiving for the Ephesian church and offers up a prayer. In his statement of thanksgiving, what is Paul thankful for? Are these accomplishments that any church would be pleased to have obtained? Explain.
2. Next, Paul prays for this church's continued growth. In v.17-19, what are the things that Paul tells the Ephesians that he hopes they will acquire? Are these items high on your list when you pray for yourself, as an individual Jesus follower, and for Hillside as your church? Why?
3. In vs.18-19, Paul reminds the Ephesians of the blessings they have in Christ. What are these blessings? Why are they important for a church?
4. Starting in v.19, how does Paul describe the resurrection and ascension of Jesus to His throne in heaven? Why do you suppose Paul wants to call this out to the Ephesian church?

5. Paul writes from his own solid view of who he knows Jesus to be based on his conversion experience and years of prayerfully studying the Old Testament and seeking the guidance of the Spirit. He reveals how the Word shaped his understanding as he cites text from two Psalms: 110 and 8. Look at v.20 and then read Psalm 110. Next, look at v.22 and then read Psalm 8. What do you find in these Psalms that supports what Paul presents in the verses cited? What is Paul doing for the Ephesian church by proclaiming these prophetic characterizations of Jesus from the Old Testament?

6. Paul concludes his prayer in vs.22-23 by describing what God intends for Jesus to be and do as the head of the church. What strikes you about the way Paul defines this?

7. What does Paul mean by saying in v.23 that the church is "His body and the fulness of Him who fills all in all"? Does this impact your view of Jesus and His role as leader of the church? Explain.

Background and Other Considerations:

- Like the preceding passage (vs. 3-14), the original Greek text of this letter shows that vs.15-23 are one continuous sentence.
- In his commentary, *The Vision of the Ephesians*, NT Wright proposes that Psalm 8 and 110 were high in the early church's popularity because of the way they speak of the Messiah. There were those in the Judean world at the time of Paul who were anxious for the Messiah to rise up and lead them to a miraculous victory over Rome and other forces that sought to hold Israel in captivity. However, the way that Jesus lived into His Messiah role was much grander. His victory was over spiritual forces with consequences for all humanity and for all time. Further, it became evident that the Messiah was a human and that the Messiah was/is the Son of God, making Him a member of the trinity. Rome was a strong empire but they faded away over time, even adopting the view of Jesus' Lordship before eventually being defeated and thrown from power centuries later. Rome was a temporary authority and power; Jesus' Kingdom reigns forever.
- NT Wright also proposes in his commentary that we see, in Paul's prayer, how he lays out the vision for the church as being *in the Messiah*, being filled with the knowledge of Him, and being "small working models of new creation"; i.e., being renewed/transformed into that which God intended for His creation. Images of Messiah-shaped people, the church is to become the true humans described in Psalm 8, following the King described in Psalm 110, who is now the true King of Israel and of all who commit their allegiance to Him.
- About 5 years before writing this letter to the Ephesian church, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. In his first letter, at 15:28, he uses the same phrase of God being "all in all". This verse establishes that God the Father has intended for His Son, Jesus, to be the King forever, and the King will remain subject to the Father forever. And as God is one with the Son, the Son as God will be one with us, as we are subject to Him. This is not pantheism/eastern mysticism but the true rendering of order per God's intended design for creation.
- NT Wright points to Isaiah 11 as another popular text of the early church in how it calls how the qualities of the new King and describes the wonders of the new creation. The "Spirit of wisdom and understanding" (Isaiah 11:2) is evident in this new King and He will pass this on to His subjects, even now with the Spirit's outpouring to His church. In the new creation, "the wolf and the lamb shall dwell together" (Isaiah 11:6) which we see modeled in the church that is to be known by the love we have towards one another, full of hope and peace, yet empowered by the Holy Spirit to overcome the dark spiritual elements of our time.

1. After Paul's lofty prayer for the Ephesians in chapter 1, he then reminds them in the opening to chapter 2 from where they came - and it is not a pretty picture. Looking at vs.1-3, what status does Paul say the Ephesians held before they began following Jesus?

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authors use the term “son” to describe which spiritual state people are in? Does this have significance? Explain.

5. Paul emphasizes in v.5 that (1) God made us alive (2) in Christ. There is the cross where Jesus died. And there is His resurrection. Taken together, our sins are resolved and we now have the hope of a resurrection like His and eternal life. This is a great deal and it brings the reality of grace into focus. We were/are saved by grace and now we live by/in grace. Why is this a critical truth that binds us together as the church?

6. In v.6, Paul makes a stunning statement. He says that we have (1) been raised up with Jesus and (2) now sit with Him in heavenly places. What do you understand Paul to mean by this statement? Does this change your thinking about your walk with Jesus each day and the role of the Holy Spirit, whom He sent us as our Helper, in that walk?

7. Paul says in v.7 that we are promised “immeasurable riches” in the coming ages, referring to when Jesus returns. Why do you suppose Paul uses this unquantifiable term – immeasurable – to describe what is to come? What is your reaction to this?

Background and Other Considerations:

- Paul begins chapter 2 of Ephesians with the words “And you...” The “you” certainly included the Ephesians, but to be clear, that “you” also included/includes everyone – Jew, Gentile, at that present time, and since that time. The offer of the Gospel was inclusive to Judean and Gentile then as it is now to all humankind. We look around at those attending Hillside today and there is quite an ethnic mix. But in the time of Paul, Jews mingling with Gentiles in joint worship was not a norm. In fact, great concern was expressed by Jews who wanted to avoid “cleanness” issue caused by too close a physical association/proximity with the “unclean” Gentiles. The fact that the early church overcame such barriers is truly amazing and a testament to the clarity of the Gospel message stripping away the old ideas/traditions and creating a new norm in acceptable social behaviors. We have different challenges today in our churches. But the message of the New Testament is clear: all are welcome and can come into the family of God. Of course, people come after submitting to the Lordship of Christ, which includes acknowledging His will and His ways while leaving behind the insistence of having some/all of our will/ways come along with us. There is a line drawn that separates the church and the secular community. We read of the conflicts that Paul encountered from the Jews that wanted to join the early church but insisted that the ‘old’ customs and traditions needed to be maintained. The church under its leadership of Peter and James clarified in no uncertain terms that this was not the way of God and His church. So it is today as we encounter various social issues that some want to bring along into the church and insist that they be recognized, tolerated, and even adopted. Spirit-led discernment is needed by our leaders to make Godly, wise, scripture-based decisions.
- Speaking of “new norms”, one idea that NT Wright raises multiple times in his commentary on Ephesians, *The Vision of the Ephesians*, is that the Gospel message is not about resolving sin and obtaining salvation with the sole outcome of “getting to heaven”. It is about our sin and salvation through Jesus and accepting His offer of grace, but the outcome is entering into His Kingdom *which is coming to you*. In other words, your soul is not going to heaven, heaven comes to you as Jesus comes, completes final judgment, and then restores all of creation. That restoration work includes our receiving resurrection bodies so that we may live forever in the new earth and heavens which will now be joined together – the barrier is gone. Jew and Gentile alike had no concept of these ideas even though subtle hints exist in Old Testament prophecies. Paul has clarified for all what the path forward looks like.
- In v. 2, Paul refers to Satan as the “prince of the power of the air”. When asked at a Christian conference what this means, John Piper made the following points (paraphrased):
 - o While an unusual title, it appears to acknowledge some measure of authority God has allowed Satan for a temporary period of time.
 - o This “prince” (not “king”) remains under the authority of God and King Jesus.
 - o While Satan has some “power,” it is not anywhere equivalent to the omnipotent capabilities of God.
 - o The reference to “air” has to be considered in the context of the 1st century and the common understanding of what air was and where it existed. In essence, it was considered to be everywhere, which points out the danger of Satan and those who he rules (his demons) – they are not omnipresent, but they are preying on you.
 - o Taken together, this is a formidable adversary to us, but not to God. In fact, as pointed out in the New Testament a number of times, this prince is already defeated and simply waiting for God’s final judgment to be announced/executed.

Study #6: Ephesians 2:8-10

1. Paul returns to a favorite topic of his: God's amazing saving grace. In chapter 1, he talked about the "riches of His grace lavished on us" (1:7-8), and in chapter 2 he stated that, by grace, we are saved (2:5). Now, in v.8, he restates that: "By grace you have been saved through faith." Paul then adds: "And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." What is actually involved in accepting this free gift from God?

2. The Ephesian church was composed of both Gentiles, with pagan roots/backgrounds, and Judeans, with some degree of Old Testament knowledge and steeped in Jewish traditions. How do you suppose these people (Gentiles and then Judeans) reacted to hearing about a God who loved them and had extended to all the free gift of His grace in Christ? How did you initially react to hearing the Gospel message and the offer of grace?

3. In v.9, Paul continues to explain God's grace. He says that it is not based on "works" that anyone can do, and that it is offered as a gift so no one can "boast" about receiving it. Again, for the Gentiles and Judeans hearing this, why do you suppose some may have struggled believing this was a "real deal"?

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Background and Other Considerations:

- Greco-Roman religions at the time of Paul were mainly pagan-based. Paganism recognized gods and goddesses who were celebrated and worshipped by followers throughout the Gentile world. Did these gods and goddesses “love” their followers? Not really – if sacrifices were made and/or the right words were said during worship, maybe they would grant one good fortune...or not. It was common to say that the gods/goddesses were fickle. How about the idea of “grace”? Again, this was not a hallmark of paganism. Instead, paganism favored the notion of reciprocity; i.e., “I give so that you might give.” The Gentile pagan, then, was used to worship being about bargaining with the god/goddess one was addressing, hoping to “please them” and find favor such that what was hoped for could be obtained. If something good happened, it was because you somehow pleased your god/goddess. The Christian story of there being a God, one God, who created all and loved His creation, and who sought to restore the broken relationship between Himself and His disobedient people through a free, undeserved and unmerited offer of grace – this was unparalleled in the world. Gentiles hearing the Gospel of Christ were amazed that the God of the Jews was “the” creator, was a God of love, that He sent His only Son to rescue humanity from certain destruction, and to join with Him required nothing but allegiance and submission to Jesus – no bargaining, no false hopes, no sacrifices, with a path to a secure and eternal future. God's grace is good.
- In v.10, Paul says we are God's “workmanship”. The Greek word used is *poiema* which is the word from which we get poem. That word is also used to define a craftsman's product such as a fabric or a sculpture. We are created in His image and Paul says we are made by God to be like a unique work of art. Look at Psalm 139:13-16. How does this Psalm support Paul's use of the word he used to describe us/you?

1. Paul opens this next passage (vs.11-12) by addressing the Gentiles in his letter's audience, asking them to "remember". What is Paul asking them to remember? These things that Paul is asking the Gentiles to recall, are they pleasant memories? Explain.
2. At v.13, Paul introduces a hinge point by saying, "But now..." Reading in vs.13-14, what has changed for Gentiles?
3. Paul reminds the Judeans in the Ephesian church that they used to refer to Gentiles using a variety of off-putting and/or derogatory terms, one being "the uncircumcised." Paul describes how Jesus has "broken down" the wall of hostility, of separation. In the Jerusalem temple, Gentiles could come and worship but they were restricted to the outer court, marked by a low wall beyond which no Gentile was allowed to cross. If you were a God-seeker and thought "the God of the Jews may be who I must worship" but faced such a barrier, how would you feel? Does this kind of separation and distancing seem likely to be resolved easily through negotiation and dedicated issue resolution, bringing Judean and Gentile together? Explain.

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Background and Other Considerations:

- The temple in Jerusalem was the most holy spot for Jews and remains so today. Although the temple and its design left room for all to come to God it just was not as welcoming in the pre-Christ era. Of course, first, there is all the dogma associated with Jewish traditions: circumcision, Sabbath, dietary laws (that's right – no bacon!), a strong culture built around history and "rules" formed over many hundreds of years. Then, there is the temple itself. To come to the temple, first came the outer court where you were prevented from going further by a low wall with signs instructing Gentiles not to pass on pain of death. The next court was for Judean women. Only Judean men could enter the next court, and then only priests could go further in. Finally, there is the Holy of Holies which could only be penetrated by the High Priest on special occasions. Recall Jesus, on the cross, and as He died, the veil in the temple Holy of Holies, was torn from top to bottom. Jesus' death removed even the most sacred barrier in the temple, the curtail that restricted all but the High Priest from coming into the presence of God. The separation between God and His people, His Covenant Family, was now gone – for the Judeans and for the Gentiles.
- Paul says in v.13 that all have been brought near to God through the blood of Christ. This reference had nuances for both Jew and Gentile. For Jews, they knew that the sacrificing of animals was highly symbolic. It wasn't just the killing of animals that was to achieve "atonement". It was the blood (the sign of life) of a once-living animal that was needed to symbolically wash away the stain of death and the sin that caused that death. Gentiles, on the other hand, also practiced animal sacrifice. Recall from last week's study (in the Background section), Pagan worshippers based their relationship with their gods/goddesses on the idea of reciprocity. In other words, I sacrifice this animal for you and now you'll do me a favor, right? But Paul is telling both Judean and Gentile that Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice – His death and shed blood broke death, cleansed sin, and created the pathway for all to come to God and enjoy the "riches of His grace" (v.7). Jew and Gentile now had completely common ground in Christ. In fact, each had/has a place in God's Covenant Family.

1. Paul continues his discourse on unity as we move into Chapter 3. In v.17, he calls out how the world at the time of Jesus was split into those who were “far” and those who were “near”. To whom is he referring and why would he label these people this way?

2. Recalling Jesus' ministry, what specific messages ("preaching") did He deliver that led one to see that He was calling all people to join together in His Kingdom, and that His means to achieve this end was to establish a way of peace? What was/is the way of peace that He preached?
3. How does v.18 define the great equalizer between peoples of different cultures, races, belief systems, nationality, gender, ideology, etc.? What is at the core of this equalizer that brings all onto a common footing?

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Background and Other Considerations:

- In v.17, Paul refers to what Jesus came to preach as He carried out His ministry on earth. Mark 1:14-15 presents a short summary of what Jesus saw as His ministry, and the key element of it was for people to hear and accept the Gospel message. Paul tells us in our Ephesians passage that the Gospel message included as a core piece the definition of and pathway to individual peace.
- In his commentary on Ephesians (The Vision of the Ephesians), NT Wright points out that the language Paul uses in this passage has strong temple connotations. He returns to a theme he introduces early in his book, that of the church being a small working model of the *new creation*. What is the temple? It is the place God inhabits, it is where His people come to worship Him together, it is where His Covenant Family learns more about Him and is guided in their path forward. Paul uses terms that relate to building: structure, foundation, cornerstone/capstone, the different parts being joined together – all these help us visualize a massive and glorious cathedral, grander than anything we have ever imagined. And it is alive because we are through the Spirit who has “quickened” us.
- In v.20, Paul uses an interesting phrase. He says we are “built on the *foundation* of the Apostles and Prophets”. Recall Jesus’ words to Peter in Matthew 16:18 after Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah, to which Jesus declared that He would build His church upon this “rock” (which is what the name “Peter” means). Peter represents the first of what has now become billions of people over time to declare that Jesus is the Messiah, the King. And the prophets are those who spoke truth in the ancient days of Israel, calling out Israel’s failing in holding to the Covenant they made with God, and prophesizing the coming of the one to correct the brokenness caused by this failure.
- A cornerstone is a term used in the distant past, but also used in recent times, as a physical marker (literally a large block) that was set first and, from it, the rest of the building was marked out. This enabled builders to have a reference for measures, checking for how “square” the measure lines were in relation to each other (e.g., perpendicular), so that the resulting structure was dimensionally sound and stable (not like, say, the leaning tower of Pisa). Today, builders rely on GPS and lasers and such to ensure structures large and small meet the test of stability and dimensional correctness.

Study #9: Ephesians 3:1-7

1. Paul opens this part of his letter with some explanation about his unique role in spreading the Gospel and growing the church. As he starts, he makes note of the fact that he was literally a "*prisoner* for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles". Why do you suppose Paul thought it important to emphasize his current status as a prisoner? What does this say about his current life in comparison to what you know about his pre-conversion life?

2. Could Paul, by mentioning his prisoner status, also be suggesting to Ephesians that they too should each evaluate their own lives? In particular, could he be asking them (and us) to consider what they were once a prisoner of/to, and would they say that they too are now a prisoner for Christ? Explain.

3. A theme Paul has been building upon involves what is now new in the world and in the lives of the Ephesians. NT Wright in his commentary on Ephesians (The Vision of the Ephesians) has identified this theme as Paul calling out the *new creation* that God has established in the emergence of His church. Old things, such as the rift between Jews and Gentiles, can now be left to the past because of the *new* Kingdom under a *new* King. It is all *new* and amazing; Paul calls it a "mystery". As you read this passage, do you see this theme being reinforced? Explain.

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Background and Other Considerations:

- Paul did have a unique set of qualifications and circumstances which God used to accomplish many things for the early church. His training as a Pharisee made him an Old Testament scholar. In terms of adhering to the Scripture and the law, Paul (then called Saul) was as Jewish as one could be. His "service" to Judean religious leaders demonstrated his zeal and commitment to see a task through, even though that task was diametrically opposite what Jesus wanted for his church, a matter corrected one day as Paul was riding to Damascus (Acts 8 and 9). After his conversion, Paul's time of discovering about Jesus and His vision for the church is not well-documented but we know a great deal was revealed to him. Paul, now an Apostle, had to prove himself to his fellow Apostles but they did come to regard him as one of Jesus' trusted followers, even though he had been an enemy/persecutor. Paul credits Jesus for his instruction and reorientation (see Galatians 1:11-17). For one so Jewish, it is amazing to read of Paul's fervor for bringing the Gospel to the Gentile world. It is due to this special revelation Paul received that he refers to the "mystery of the Gospel" in Ephesians 3. Paul was given the big picture by Jesus and it changed who he was in terms of his new purpose, but his unique qualities and background made him the right guy for the job he was given.
- The story behind Paul's arrest that eventually leads him to being under house arrest in Rome begins in Acts 21:27. We see in this account that Paul is accused by a fellow Jew of unacceptable teaching and even bringing Greeks (Gentiles) into the temple, defiling that holy place. Yes, Paul's understanding of how the Gospel of Christ applied equally to Jew and Gentile, and how that Gospel changed the way even Jews should think about the "old traditions" as no longer being valid was very controversial. But Paul was committed and even willing to "do" jail time so that he could have the opportunity to share the Gospel message with leaders in Rome. Paul had received a special revelation directly from Jesus following his conversion experience and this emboldened him to allow circumstance to play out such that he was delivered to Rome so that he might eventually present what he knew to be the truth to the world leaders at that time. It led to him eventually being executed but years later, the Roman empire turned to Christ. Mysterious...

1. Paul declares in v.8 that he is the “least of the saints”. Considering all that Paul has done for Gentiles (recorded in Acts and his many letters in the New Testament), how can he say this? Is this false modesty? If not, what is his basis for this claim? Do you think his claim is important to effectively do the “job” (see v.7) he’s been given by God? Explain.

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Background and Other Considerations:

- Paul uses the Greek word *anexichniastos* to describe the vastness of the riches we have in Christ. That word can be equated to terms like untraceable, unsearchable, unfathomable – all conveying a sense of an inability to exhaustively define and describe/quantify of what this wealth we now have really consists. As an illustration, we have physical concepts in our world that exist that present limits to our ability to “see” and define what is quite real such as the depth of outer space (it appears to have no end). Another is the search for and full understanding of the sub-particle world (how can its constituents and boundaries ever be seen?). Recall Moses coming upon a manifestation of God on the side of His mountain, a bush that burns yet will not consume itself. Fuel in the form of wood, fire and oxygen are all present yet it appears to be self-sufficient and sustaining – clearly not of this world. It is likely that a large measure of the riches of God cannot be fully known/understood by us until we can discern or finally arrive in the new creation God has planned for us.
- In v. 10, Paul refers to the *manifold* wisdom of God. The Greek word cited for manifold is *polupoikilos*. This word in the Greek was used to refer to something of multiple colors or shades such as in a variegated plant leaf. It has other definitions such as multi-faceted or many numbered. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament a simpler version of this word was used to describe the multi-colored coat that Jacob had given his son Joseph, a coat made from many different colored pieces of fabric then woven together to make one special garment for a favored son. This suggests that God's wisdom is not only multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and highly varied but also spectacular and amazing to behold. The church, then, is a symbolic image of that wisdom by being multi-national, multi-racial and multi-cultural. I suspect the surprise that God has revealed to humanity and to His adversaries in the heavenly realm was that, in His church, Christ was bringing together all the peoples that had been scattered due to evil unleashed in the world. This reversal of chaos is another sure sign of the pending ultimate defeat of evil after already receiving the death-blow to death itself when Jesus walked out of His tomb.
- In v.13, Paul returns to the topic of the suffering he is enduring in his imprisonment, but he now calls it out as the glory of the Ephesians. His suffering, their glory – what? The Gospel story is full of the suffering of individuals (most notably, Jesus Himself) yet this suffering leads to *glory*, for those who have selflessly given themselves up to face suffering and for those who are blessed by the results obtained because of the suffering endured. There is a cost for doing the Word, following Jesus, being the church. This subtle message to the Ephesians is also for us to consider even though the times have changed and the suffering we may face is different. But glory is revealed in that suffering and it exposes the goodness of God, and as Paul explains in our passage, that is at the heart of what we are about.

1. Paul began a prayer at the start of chapter 3. In v.1 he wrote: “For this reason...” but broke off that thought and discussed the mystery of the Gospel. Now, in v.14, he repeats what he wrote at the beginning of chapter 3 as an introduction to his prayer. Going back to chapter 2, what is the “reason” that Paul refers to which forms the basis of his prayer?

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Background and Other Considerations:

- John Stott, in his commentary on Ephesians (*The Message of Ephesians*), says:
One of the best ways to discover a Christian's chief anxieties and ambitions is to study the content of his or her prayers and the intensity with which he or she prays them. With respect to Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21, Stott notes that Paul is clearly writing about a deep desire of his heart. In Paul's other letters, he often encourages us to pray about all things, and I'm sure he did aspire to this in his own life. But Stott's point is that, here, we get a glimpse into Paul's heart of hearts and "discover" that Paul truly saw the life of the church as having enormous importance to God and His master plan. To say this inspired Paul in his work is an understatement.
- Another clue into Paul's heart-felt concern for the church in this prayer is given in v.14 when Paul writes that he bows his knees before the Father. Jews traditionally prayed standing up. It was exceptional that one of Paul's background training, education and experience would go to his knees in offering a prayer. Such examples of those who did this include Ezra's prayer of confession of Israel's sin before God (Ezra 10:1). Jesus would normally stand when He prayed but we know that in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus (like Ezra) cast Himself down as He sought strength from the Father to complete His mission.
- Stott notes in his commentary, cited above, that Paul has a tendency to closely link Jesus and the Spirit in his writing. Is this puzzling? Jesus told His disciples that He and the Father are one. It seems reasonable that Jesus would also say that He and the Spirit are one... and that the Father and the Spirit are one. They are distinct "persons" making up the triune God, but they are inextricably one. Paul's writing embraces this "oneness" while also being clear who each "person" is in our lives.