

New York Times BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MAX LUCADO

LIFE LESSONS *from*

EPHESIANS



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EPHESIANS
Where You Belong

PREPARED BY THE LIVINGSTONE CORPORATION



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Life Lessons from Ephesians

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HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

The Bible is a peculiar book. Words crafted in another language. Deeds done in a distant era. Events recorded in a far-off land. Counsel offered to a foreign people. It is a peculiar book.

It's surprising that anyone reads it. It's too old. Some of its writings date back 5,000 years. It's too bizarre. The book speaks of incredible floods, fires, earthquakes, and people with supernatural abilities. It's too radical. The Bible calls for undying devotion to a carpenter who called himself God's Son.

Logic says this book shouldn't survive. Too old, too bizarre, too radical.

The Bible has been banned, burned, scoffed, and ridiculed. Scholars have mocked it as foolish. Kings have branded it as illegal. A thousand times over the grave has been dug and the dirge has begun, but somehow the Bible never stays in the grave. Not only has it survived, but it has also thrived. It is the single most popular book in all of history. It has been the bestselling book in the world for years!

There is no way on earth to explain it. Which perhaps is the only explanation. For the Bible's durability is not found on *earth* but in *heaven*. The millions who have tested its claims and claimed its promises know there is but one answer: the Bible is God's book and God's voice.

As you read it, you would be wise to give some thought to two questions: *What is the purpose of the Bible?* and *How do I study the Bible?* Time spent reflecting on these two issues will greatly enhance your Bible study.

What is the purpose of the Bible?

Let the Bible itself answer that question: *“From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus”* (2 Timothy 3:15).

The purpose of the Bible? Salvation. God’s highest passion is to get his children home. His book, the Bible, describes his plan of salvation. The purpose of the Bible is to proclaim God’s plan and passion to save his children.

This is the reason why this book has endured through the centuries. It dares to tackle the toughest questions about life: *Where do I go after I die? Is there a God? What do I do with my fears?* The Bible is the treasure map that leads to God’s highest treasure—eternal life.

But how do you study the Bible? Countless copies of Scripture sit unread on bookshelves and nightstands simply because people don’t know how to read it. What can you do to make the Bible real in your life?

The clearest answer is found in the words of Jesus: *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you”* (Matthew 7:7).

The first step in understanding the Bible is asking God to help you. You should read it prayerfully. If anyone understands God’s Word, it is because of God and not the reader.

“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26).

Before reading the Bible, pray and invite God to speak to you. Don’t go to Scripture looking for your idea, but go searching for his.

Not only should you read the Bible prayerfully, but you should also read it carefully. *“Seek and you will find”* is the pledge. The Bible is not

a newspaper to be skimmed but rather a mine to be quarried. *“If you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God”* (Proverbs 2:4–5).

Any worthy find requires effort. The Bible is no exception. To understand the Bible, you don’t have to be brilliant, but you must be willing to roll up your sleeves and search.

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

Here’s a practical point. Study the Bible a bit at a time. Hunger is not satisfied by eating twenty-one meals in one sitting once a week. The body needs a steady diet to remain strong. So does the soul. When God sent food to his people in the wilderness, he didn’t provide loaves already made. Instead, he sent them manna in the shape of *“thin flakes like frost on the ground”* (Exodus 16:14).

God gave manna in limited portions.

God sends spiritual food the same way. He opens the heavens with just enough nutrients for today’s hunger. He provides *“a rule for this, a rule for that; a little here, a little there”* (Isaiah 28:10).

Don’t be discouraged if your reading reaps a small harvest. Some days a lesser portion is all that is needed. What is important is to search every day for that day’s message. A steady diet of God’s Word over a lifetime builds a healthy soul and mind.

It’s much like the little girl who returned from her first day at school feeling a bit dejected. Her mom asked, “Did you learn anything?”

“Apparently not enough,” the girl responded. “I have to go back tomorrow, and the next day, and the next . . .”

Such is the case with learning. And such is the case with Bible study. Understanding comes little by little over a lifetime.

There is a third step in understanding the Bible. After the asking and seeking comes the knocking. After you ask and search, *“knock and the door will be opened to you”* (Matthew 7:7).

To knock is to stand at God's door. To make yourself available. To climb the steps, cross the porch, stand at the doorway, and volunteer. Knocking goes beyond the realm of thinking and into the realm of acting.

To knock is to ask, *What can I do? How can I obey? Where can I go?*

It's one thing to know what to do. It's another to do it. But for those who do it—those who choose to obey—a special reward awaits them.

“Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do” (James 1:25).

What a promise. Blessings come to those who do what they read in God's Word! It's the same with medicine. If you only read the label but ignore the pills, it won't help. It's the same with food. If you only read the recipe but never cook, you won't be fed. And it's the same with the Bible. If you only read the words but never obey, you'll never know the joy God has promised.

Ask. Search. Knock. Simple, isn't it? So why don't you give it a try? If you do, you'll see why the Bible is the most remarkable book in history.

INTRODUCTION TO *The Book of Ephesians*

I've just witnessed a beautiful wedding. The most beautiful I've ever seen. That says a lot, since I've seen a lot. Ministers see many weddings. It's a perk of the profession.

Is there anything more elegant than a wedding? Candles bathe a chapel in gold. Loving families fill the pews. Groomsmen and bridesmaids descend the aisles with bouquets of newness and rings of promise. What an occasion.

And nothing quite compares with that moment when the bride stands at the top of the aisle. Arm entwined with her father's, she takes those final steps with him and steps toward a new life with her groom.

Ahh, the glory of a wedding. So to say I just saw the most beautiful one is no small thing. What made these nuptials so unforgettable? The groom. Usually the groom is not the star of the wedding. The fellow is typically upstaged by the girl. But this wedding was made special by the groom. It was enhanced by something he did.

And who he was made what he did even more startling. You see, he's a cowboy: a stocky fellow who went to college on a rodeo scholarship. But the one standing by me was not a macho calf roper, but a pinch-me-I'm-dreaming boy who'd never seen a bride so gorgeous.

He was composed as he walked down the aisle. He was fine as he took his place at the altar.

But when he saw the bride, he wept.

It was the moment he'd dreamed of. It was as if he'd been given life's greatest gift—a bride in all her beauty. By the way, those are the very words Paul uses to describe the church: a bride in all her beauty.

“[Jesus] died so that he could give the church to himself like a bride in all her beauty. He died so that the church could be pure and without fault, with no evil or sin or any other wrong thing in it” (Ephesians 5:27 NCV).

Ponder that verse. Jesus died for a bride. He died so he could be married. This passage anticipates the day when the groom will see his bride—when Christ will receive his church. Jesus' fondest longing will be fulfilled. His Bride will arrive.

The letter to the Ephesians celebrates the beauty of the church—the Bride of Christ. From our perspective the church isn't so pretty. We see the backbiting, the squabbling, the divisions. Heaven sees that, as well. But heaven sees more. Heaven sees the church as cleansed and made holy by Christ.

Heaven sees the church ascending to heaven. Heaven sees the Bride wearing the spotless gown of Jesus Christ.

It's enough to make one weep.

AUTHOR AND DATE

Paul, who persecuted the early church before his life was radically altered by meeting the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:1–31). Paul founded the church in Ephesus during his second missionary journey c. AD 52 (see 18:19) and spent three years teaching there during his third missionary journey c. AD 54–56 (see 19:8–10). He ultimately left the city following an uprising by the local silversmiths, who were angry his teaching had led to a loss in their profits (see 19:23–31). Paul likely wrote the letter c. AD 60 from Rome, where he was imprisoned at the time, and intended it to be circulated to a number of churches in the region

around Ephesus rather than to a specific community in the city. It was delivered by Tychicus, likely at the same time as Colossians and Philemon (see Ephesians 6:21–22).

SITUATION

The general nature of Ephesians makes it difficult to determine the exact purpose for which Paul wrote the letter or the specific problems that he was seeking to resolve. However, if the letter was written at the same time as Colossians, it can be surmised that Paul was seeking to address the same types of problems in the Ephesian church as in the church in Colossae: the infiltration of false teachings. As with the letter of Colossians, Paul wished to stamp out this false teaching before it could do major damage, and, in the process, encourage the believers to recognize their high calling as children and heirs of God.

KEY THEMES

- We have many spiritual blessings through Christ.
- Each believer is gifted through the Spirit of God.
- Our faith should work its way into all of our relationships.
- Our spiritual strength comes from God through his Word and our faith.

KEY VERSE

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8).

CONTENTS

- I. Spiritual Blessings (1:1–3:21)
- II. Unity and the Christian Lifestyle (4:1–6:24)

LESSON ONE

WHERE DO YOU BELONG?

*In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being
predestined according to the purpose of Him who works
all things according to the counsel of His will.*

EPHESIANS 1:11 NKJV



REFLECTION

Paul opens his letter with a glorious anthem of praise for all the blessings that believers have “in Christ.” One blessing is that they belong to God’s family—a community of faith. Think of a time when you felt a true sense of belonging to a community or group of people. Consider the atmosphere, circumstances, and purpose of the group. What did it feel like to belong?

SITUATION

The apostle Paul had much invested in the church of Ephesus. For three years he had lived in the city, built relationships with members of the community, and provided a strong foundation for the church. Now, even though he was in prison, he wanted to encourage believers in the church (and in the surrounding region) to recognize the blessings God had given them by adopting them into his family. Paul also wanted to compel them to stay true to the message of the gospel he had taught them in the face of false teachings in their midst. He begins with an expression of praise to God—a reminder of how God has set the believers apart for his service.

OBSERVATION

Read Ephesians 1:1–14 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ 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.

⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹²in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

NEW KING JAMES VERSION

¹ Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God,

To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, ⁵having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, ⁶to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.

⁷ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace ⁸which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, ⁹having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, ¹⁰that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him. ¹¹ In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, ¹²that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.

¹³ In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

EXPLORATION

1. What are some of the spiritual blessings you have in Christ?

2. God offers the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ. What difference should that make in your daily life?

3. What is special about the fact that God deliberately chose to adopt you into his family?

4. For what reason did God choose to make you a member of his family?

5. What does Paul say that God makes known to his people? What does this mean to you?

6. In what way is the Holy Spirit God's mark of ownership on you?

INSPIRATION

And you thought God adopted you because you were good looking. You thought he needed your money or your wisdom. Sorry. God adopted you simply because he wanted to. You were in his good will and pleasure. Knowing full well the trouble you would be and the price he would pay, he signed his name next to yours and changed your name to his and took you home. Your *Abba* adopted you and became your Father.

May I pause here for just a minute? Most of you are with me . . . but a couple of you are shaking your heads. I see those squinty eyes. You don't believe me, do you? You're waiting for the fine print. There's got to be a gimmick. You know life has no free lunch, so you're waiting for the check.

Your discomfort is obvious. Even here in God's living room, you never unwind. Others put on slippers, you put on a front. Others relax, you stiffen. Always on your best behavior, ever anxious that you'll slip up and God will notice and out you'll go.

I understand your anxiety. Our experience with people has taught us that what is promised and what is presented aren't always the same. And for some, the thought of trusting a heavenly Father is doubly difficult because your earthly father disappointed or mistreated you.

If such is the case, I urge you: Don't confuse your heavenly Father with the fathers you've seen on earth. Your Father in heaven isn't prone to headaches and temper tantrums. He doesn't hold you one day and hit you the next. The man who fathered you may play such games, but the God who loves you never will. (From *The Great House of God* by Max Lucado.)

REACTION

7. What are some situations in your life where you have vividly felt you didn't belong?

8. How did you discover you were highly regarded by someone? What did that feel like? In what ways did it affect your actions?

9. What is the problem with comparing God as your heavenly Father with an earthly father?

10. What conclusions can you draw from the statement that God chose you "before the creation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4)?

LIFE LESSONS

11. In what ways do you bring praise to God’s glory?

12. Who in your life has exemplified God’s grace to you? How did the person do this for you?

LIFE LESSONS

We experience “belonging” in many ways in modern life: playing on a sports team, participating in community at work, or joining any number of different types of clubs. The attraction of these connections illustrates just how badly we all long to belong. Yet what these earth-based groups offer in part, our heavenly Father offers in whole. We long to belong because we were designed to belong. However, until we know to *whom* we belong, life will always lack a sense of ultimate purpose and direction. In Christ, we can experience true belonging. Acknowledging that God has chosen us and “owns” us begins a great adventure of freedom and service for Christ.

DEVOTION

Thank you, God, for choosing us. May we be spurred on by your love to do great works, and yet never substitute those works for your great grace. May we always hear your voice. Keep us amazed and mesmerized by what you have done for us.

WHERE DO YOU BELONG?

JOURNALING

How does it affect you personally to know that you are *valued* and *chosen* by God?

FOR FURTHER READING

To complete the book of Ephesians during this twelve-part study, read Ephesians 1:1–14. For more Bible passages on being a member of God’s family, read John 1:11–13; Romans 8:15–17; Galatians 3:26–4:7; and Hebrews 12:8–11.