

Lesson 1





Where We're Going

By the end of this lesson, participants will explore the meaning of being accepted into God's family; reflect upon being claimed by God as God's children; and strive to always thankfully worship God for forgiveness, redemption, grace, and our inheritance through Jesus Christ.



Adoption for All

After the evangelism committee meeting, Joanne stayed and waited for Debra to finish chatting with their ministry team members. Earlier that evening, they used Ephesians 1 as the Scripture for the meditation session Debra led. The pastor was beginning a series of Bible studies from that epistle as well. While Debra was gathering her belongings, Joanne quietly approached her and asked if she could speak to her about what she shared.

Debra hugged Joanne and thanked her for waiting so patiently to speak with her.

"I should thank you because I'm keeping you from going home to your family," Joanne said.

"My family will be there when I get there, Jo. I called and checked during our break. My husband has everything under control." She continued, "What do you need? You had a question for me?"

Joanne nodded.

"Have a seat," Debra said. "Let's hear it then."

Joanne sat next to Debra and began her series of questions with, "How could God just let me in His family and adopt me as I am?"

Debra listened carefully. Then she asked Joanne if she'd ever wondered whether or not God was trustworthy.

"You're asking me if I can trust God?" Joanne replied, with a stunned look on her face.

"That's the real question," Debra said.

"Is it?" Joanne asked as she sat at attention.

"Of course it is. You're struggling to believe that you could be loved by God, and adopted as His child, with entitlement to a full inheritance from Him when you've done nothing—absolutely zero—to earn or deserve it." Debra created the shape of the number zero with both hands and said, "At least that's what I'm hearing, sweetheart."

"Is that normal?" Joanne asked.

"Normal?" Debra laughed. "If it ain't normal, not one of us is! Everybody feels the way you feel when the reality of the Good News confronts us. We desperately need Jesus, and when we submit to that, it isn't always pretty, Joanne." She continued, "But the Lord embraces us as His own because He loves us so much."

"What about my sins?" Joanne blurted out.

Debra shook her head as if she anticipated the question. "Jesus takes them upon Himself. When He was nailed to the Cross, your sins were nailed onto that same Cross along with Him."

"That sounds incredible."

"That's the point," Debra continued. "Scripture says that even when we are faithless, He remains faithful to His Word because that's His natural righteous character, and He cannot deny Himself."

"Where does it say that?" Joanne asked.

"2 Timothy 2:13," Debra replied.

"Wow! That is good news," Joanne said as her eyes filled with tears.



Real Talk

1. Every believer has been adopted into the family of God. Are there any differences between the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of adopted children and biological children?
2. What is the inheritance that Christians have obtained in Christ Jesus?



The Players

The Book of Ephesians. Paul wrote the book of Ephesians while he was imprisoned (see Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; 6:20), perhaps while jailed in Rome. Most scholars agree that Ephesians was written for a wider readership than just the church at Ephesus and was probably circulated among many churches in the Roman province of Asia, where Ephesus was located.



Make It Stick

“God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son.” (Ephesians 1:5–6, NLT)



The Word (NLT)

Ephesians 1:3 All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ.

4 Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes.

5 God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.

6 So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son.

7 He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins.

8 He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.

9 God has now revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure.

10 And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.

11 Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan.

12 God’s purpose was that we Jews who were the first to trust in Christ would bring praise and glory to God.

13 And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago.

14 The Spirit is God’s guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him.



Backstage

In the original Greek text, the 12 verses of Ephesians 1:3–14 were a single sentence. This is one of the most joyful and profound passages in the Bible. Like an anthem of praise, it celebrates God’s eternal and glorious plan of redemption. It is broken into three stanzas, each beginning or ending with the phrase “to the praise of his glorious grace” (Ephesians 1:6, NIV) or “for” or “to the praise of his glory” (1:12, 14, NIV).

This passage examines the plan of redemption from a triune perspective: The first (1:3–6) praises the Father for choosing to redeem us from our sin; the second highlights Jesus as the Redeemer (1:7–12); and the third stanza (1:13–14) reveals the Holy Spirit as the living, divine presence to the church and the world.

In these verses, the vast plan of redemption is revealed from eternity before creation to the time of its future completion at the time of Christ’s Second Advent. The focus of redemption is always Christ, and the phrase “in Christ” or “in him” occurs repeatedly throughout this passage. In fact, this expression is the key phrase of this entire epistle, or letter.



Combing Through

1. God Blessed Us (Ephesians 1:3–6)

Paul begins this passage with joyful praise to God the Father for His plan of redemption and He blesses Him for the blessing of Christ Jesus. Because of Christ’s redemptive work, believers are beneficiaries of all the spiritual blessings of the “heavenly realms” (v. 3, NIV). These spiritual blessings come from living and abiding “in Christ.” Verse 4 tells us of the first blessing: We are chosen to be holy and blameless. God did not choose us because we are holy and blameless, but He chose us that we might become holy and blameless. Consider the implications: When we accept Christ as our Savior and Redeemer, we are accepting God’s offer to make us holy and blameless. He is promising to take us unworthy sinners and make us into His very own children. And we are not only joining the family, but we are also gaining all the rights and privileges that come with the position.

In addition, we were predestined, or chosen ahead of time, to become God’s children and be freely given the gift of His glorious grace. He determined beforehand what we would become or do. Some of these plans are listed in this passage of Scripture. He decided His people would be holy and blameless (v. 4), adopted as His sons and daughters (v. 5), redeemed (v. 7), for the praise of His glory (vv. 11–12), recipients of the Holy Spirit (v. 13), and given an inheritance (v. 14). Verse 6 says God has freely provided for us all these blessings by His grace and through Christ Jesus. It’s up to us to accept them.

2. Jesus Christ Redeemed Us (vv. 7–12)

This second stanza of Paul’s hymn highlights the wonder of God’s grace, revealed in the life and death of Jesus Christ. God takes sin very seriously, and it is only because of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf that we can be forgiven. But God does not forgive grudgingly. Rather, He forgives us “according to the riches of His grace” (v. 7, NKJV). God “lavished on us” His grace and forgiveness (v. 8, NIV). Just as parents love their children, God loves us. He not only adopts us into His family, but He does so in generosity and abundance.

God also promises that one day His plan for humankind will be fully accomplished. At the right time, the culmination of God’s plan will come to pass, and all will be brought together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ (v. 10). In these confusing and fearful times, it is comforting to know that there will come a time when everything will come into right relationship under the leadership of Jesus.

3. The Holy Spirit Sealed Our Salvation (vv. 13–14)

In ancient times, a seal denoted ownership. In this last stanza of Paul’s theological hymn, he speaks of the Holy Spirit’s role in our redemption. The Holy Spirit “seals” the deal. When God adopts us into His family, He gives us the Holy Spirit as evidence that we are truly His sons and daughters (Romans 8:9) with all rights and responsibilities. The Holy Spirit is also a promise of greater things to come—when God’s entire plan is accomplished and our full redemption is realized. On that great day, when all is fulfilled, the family of God will truly be “unto the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:14).



Diving Deeper Quiz

1. John 15:16 teaches that true believers did not choose Christ, but in fact, He chose them. According to today's Scripture, when exactly did God choose us?
2. Scripture says that God made known to us the mystery of His will. What was God's mysterious plan that Paul spoke of?
3. What is the guarantee that believers will receive the promised inheritance?



Next Steps

Many people don't have a clear understanding of sin. If people do not have a clear grasp of what sin is, then they don't know that they need repentance and redemption. As believers, we must have an un-

derstanding of what sin means. But more importantly, we must point the way to the Christ. His grace and love are ready to meet us. It's our mandated duty to extend the invitation.



Say Word?

Ephesians. ih-FEE-zhuns.

Predestinated. pre-DES-tuh-nay-ted.

Dispensation. dis-puhn-SEY-shuhn.

SWAG

(Spiritual Wisdom and Guidance)

The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity and held safe in an everlasting embrace ...—Henri Nouwen



Lesson 2





Where We're Going

By the end of this lesson, participants will understand Paul's explanation of Jews and Gentiles becoming one in Christ; recognize how detrimental divisions are in the church; become acquainted with uniting and dividing issues within the church; and gain the ability to create strategies for properly addressing these issues.



Saved to Sing

Minister Michael Brown, the leader of the music ministry, stopped Malisha as she was leaving the sanctuary after Sunday morning service. "I'd like you to sing a solo on the upcoming youth Sunday," Minister Michael said. "It's Youth and Young Adult Sunday, and I'm really trying to highlight our young people, especially those with tremendous gifts."

Malisha gave a nervous smile and replied, "Can I think about it?"

Minister Michael said, "Sure! I believe God is trying to move you out of the shadows and into the spotlight. He has blessed you with a tremendous gift, and He desires to use you."

Minister Michael patted Malisha on her shoulder and walked away. Malisha loved to sing and felt that singing with the choir was a huge step for her since she often felt like she wasn't good enough and didn't belong.

Malisha was a young, single mom and felt she had already made so many mistakes. She was 23 years old; most of the other people in her age group in this church didn't have children and were attending college. Since she joined the church, she always felt that everyone else was a part of some elite club for which she was never good enough to get a membership.

"Hi, Malisha!" Amber shouted from across the aisle. "I'm so glad I was able to catch up with you," she continued. "You usually leave so quickly after church that I don't get a chance to talk to you. I'd love to exchange phone numbers."

Malisha just smiled as Amber continued, "I just wanted to let you know that I really admire you. Whenever school gets tough for me or I start to feel sorry for myself, I think about you and how faithful you are to the ministry. You come to choir rehearsal every week with your son, and you never seem to complain. I always look for you, and find the strength to keep pressing on when I see you."

Malisha was more stunned than flattered. She replied, "Really? I was standing here feeling like I just don't belong, because my life is so different from everybody else's. I was feeling like the rest of the young adults are a part of some elite club that I just don't fit into."

"Oh no!" Amber exclaimed. "You know we are all one in Christ Jesus. There is no elite group or special club. Just as Jesus reconciled the Jews and the Gentiles through His blood on the Cross, so are we all one in Christ Jesus, no matter our race, culture, or background."

Fighting back tears, Malisha said, "I really needed to hear that. Minister Michael just asked if I would sing a solo on the fifth Sunday, and I told him I had to think about it because I feel so different from everyone else. I know God sent you right behind Minister Michael to help me and give me my answer. I'm going to tell him at rehearsal that I'd be happy to do it! Thank you, Amber. Your words really blessed me."



Real Talk

1. Why did Malisha feel like she doesn't fit in with the other young adults?
2. How does Amber feel about Malisha?
3. How did God take the Jews and the Gentiles, who were two separate groups of people, and unite them into one entity?



The Players

The Temple. The Temple at Jerusalem was made up of many courts. Paul focuses on the outer court, but there were four different ones. The outer court was where the Gentiles had to stay. A lot of money exchanging or selling took place in the outer court. Next, there was the court of the Jewish women. The women could only go as far as this court. Next is the court of the Israelites where the Israelite men would go and offer sacrifices. The inner court is called the "Holy of Holies." No one could go into that court except the high priest; even he could go in only once a year. Before he could enter, he had to undergo a cleansing ritual. The Holy of Holies is the place where God dwelled, separated from the rest of the temple by a curtain. The Gospels report that when Jesus was crucified, the curtain was torn.



Make It Stick

"We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord." (Ephesians 2:21, NLT)



The Word (NLT)

Ephesians 2:11 Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called "uncircumcised heathens" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts.

12 In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope.

13 But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.

14 For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us.

15 He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups.

16 Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.

17 He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near.

18 Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.

19 So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family.

20 Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.

21 We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord.

22 Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit.

Circumcision. It is the act of removing the foreskin of the male sex organ. In ancient Israel, this act was performed as a ritual on children, natives, servants, and outsiders on the eighth day after birth. In the Jewish faith, it was an external symbol of one's total and complete allegiance and devotion to Yahweh. Controversy arose in the early church over the circumcision of Gentile converts (Acts 15:13–18). During the A.D. first century, Jews frowned upon non-circumcision among Christians. Apostle Paul played a crucial role in settling the dispute. He determined that physical circumcision was not essential to Christian faith and fellowship. Circumcision of the heart through repentance and faith were the only requirements of the faith for non-Jewish Christians.



Backstage

Many barriers divided the Jews and the Gentiles in the ancient world. Paul devotes much of his attention in this portion of the letter to the essential oneness of the church. For Jews and Gentiles alike, Paul explained that keeping the law was not a requirement for salvation. Christ is the fulfillment of the law, making it complete. (Salvation cannot be earned through strict adherence to the law or by works. Nevertheless, we are not absolved of our responsibility to do what is right. Salvation by grace through faith does lead to good works; thus, no one had the right to boast about personal goodness.) There was no need for Jews and Gentiles to be divided based on Mosaic Law. Christ became and remains the peace of all believers. Therefore, there is no need for division and discord. By lessening the significance of ethnic and cultural identity, both Jews and Gentiles gained something far better and greater.



Combing Through

1. The Gentile's Status (Ephesians 2:11–13)

Paul reminds his readers that before they were converted, they were Gentiles by birth and therefore considered outcasts by the Jews. The Jews despised them, as indicated by the fact that they were called the Uncircumcision. The Jews regarded their circumcised state with snobbery, as this signified that they were God's chosen people. They referred to themselves as the Circumcision. Paul corrects their sense of superiority by clearly stating that their circumcision was by human effort and therefore merely a physical act. What was really important, he told them, was circumcision of the heart.

While the Jews held on to a false sense of superiority about their status as the chosen, the Gentiles were without a savior altogether. The Messiah was promised to the Jews, even though Isaiah foretold that the blessing would flow to all nations. Christ was sent, "unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). The Gentiles were "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel" (Ephesians 2:12). They did not belong among God's chosen. They were strangers to His promise considering all of God's covenants had promised blessings to the Jews. For all practical purposes, the Gentiles stood on the outside looking in without hope. But because of God's love, the former establishment was done away with. When the Gentiles receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, God places them in Christ and accepts them through Him. Jesus Christ has broken down the barriers that separate all people.

2. Jews and Gentiles Together (vv. 14–18)

In the first part of chapter two, Paul traces the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles. The two groups held different perceptions of what it means to be saved. Here, Paul moves forward to dissolve their nationalistic and cultural biases to affirm unity in Christ and explain the necessity for unity. Through His shed blood, Christ broke down "the middle wall of partition between us" (v. 14). The barriers that divided Jews and Gentiles are now gone. Where there were two, there is now one. There is but one Christ for both the mighty and powerful and the lowly and powerless. For every race and culture, there is only one savior.

Paul describes Christ as our peace. When Christ came to us, He "preached peace" to those near and far (v. 17). In this instance, those who were near were the Jews. They had already received a promise. Those who were afar were the Gentiles, those who had no covenant with God; they held no assurance of His presence or promise. This being the case, it is not difficult to understand why the Jews held a certain snobbery concerning their status as God's chosen people. Peace was needed to unify two groups that were alienated from each other. As our peace, Christ has created a new people, free from the limitations of imposed human boundaries such as culture, race, gender, education, social, or economic standing. All believers now have access to the presence of God at any time. This was in stark contrast to the Old Testament when only the High Priest could go into the Holy of Holies, the place where God dwelled.

3. One Church, One Foundation (vv. 19–22)

Paul often uses the words “now therefore” when making a conclusion (see v. 19). He concludes that the Gentiles were in no way inferior to the Jews. Christ did away with all of that. The apostle lists some of the many great benefits available to all believing Gentiles, as they are no longer strangers and foreigners. Never again will they be looked upon as less than others or as outsiders. Now they are fellow citizens and equal heirs to the inheritance. Christians of Jewish ancestries have no advantage over the believing Gentiles. All believers are first-class citizens in the kingdom of heaven.

As they are now a part of the Church, they have become stones, or building blocks, in the construction of a holy temple. This new

temple will also have a foundation, with Christ as the “chief corner stone” that bonds the temple together. This new Temple, the Church, is built upon the apostles and prophets of the New Testament. The apostles and prophets are not the foundation; Christ is the foundation. The foundation was laid in what the apostles and prophets taught about the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ is more than the foundation of the Church, however; He is also the chief cornerstone, joining the two walls that were once separated: Jews and Gentiles. In this new temple that Christ has created, everyone will have an equal place. When Jesus created a new covenant between God and humankind, He made a new people of God, one body—the Church.



Diving Deeper Quiz

1. What can we learn about God from the metaphors that Paul used in today’s passage?
2. What is the meaning of Ephesians 2:17 where it says that the Gentiles were far from God?
3. What is physical circumcision?
4. What is spiritual circumcision?



Next Steps

What are some ways a church can help to enhance the biblical literacy of the children and adults in its congregation?

How can congregations make biblical literacy available outside the doors of their churches?



Say Word?

Circumcision. sir-kuhm-SIZH-uhn.
Enmity. EN-mi-tee.

SWAG

(Spiritual Wisdom and Guidance)

At the end of the day, we must go forward with hope and not backward by fear and division.—Jesse Jackson

