

Strength To Stand

**31 Daily Bible Reading Notes in Ephesians
for Chinese Returnees**



Prepared for the Return

Introduction

Returning home after living abroad can be a complicated experience. Joy and grief, familiarity and distance, opportunities to serve as a Christian and challenges to your faith. How can we stand firm as Christians in the face of all this?

Ephesians 6:17 tells us to “take... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” God’s word, the Bible, gives us all that we need for whatever we experience back home, equipping us to stand firm and live for Jesus in any situation. The problem is that we often leave the sword in its sheath and fail to rely on God’s word. Immediately after returning home it can be challenging to read the Bible regularly: you’re out of your usual routine, it’s hard to find time by yourself, you might not know where to start.

These daily readings are designed to help you get into a good habit of Bible reading for the first month back home. They aim to help you not only read a passage but to reflect on it in depth, which is why some passages are studied twice... or even three times! We hope that this habit of prayerfully reflecting on God’s word will continue to be part of your life after you finish this book.

Maybe you're reading this on the plane. Or maybe you're back in your family's home for the first night. Or maybe you've already been back several days, or weeks. How does it feel to be a Christian in this environment, surrounded by people for whom Jesus means nothing? Does being a Christian ever feel weak and insignificant?

This was a familiar feeling for Christians in the city of Ephesus. Before we begin to study Paul's letter to them in detail, let's read some background about what it was like to be a Christian in Ephesus.

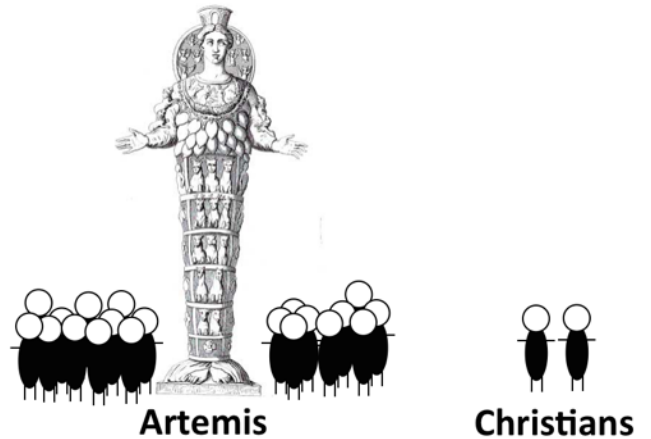
Read **Acts 19:11-41** which describes the situation in Ephesus not long after Paul first brought the gospel there.

Describe the religious background of Ephesus (v18-19, 24, 27-34)

This is a city which liked religion that was popular and impressive! We can see this from the vast number of magic books burned by the people who turned to Christ, and from the Ephesians' commitment to their goddess Artemis. She was worshipped at a vast temple in Ephesus, which was famous as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. When tradesmen feared that the spread of Christianity might hinder the worship of Artemis, the whole city rioted against the Christians, filling the theatre (v29 - a great structure that seated around 24,000 people) and shouting praise to Artemis for two hours (v34).

How might it have felt to be a Christian in Ephesus?

The Christians had no impressive temples, statues or magic books. To follow Jesus meant going against the flow, rejecting the religion that everyone else followed with such devotion. Christians could easily have felt insignificant and inferior to others. They would have looked a bit like this:



Does that feel familiar? People around you may not worship physical idols like Artemis, but every culture today has its own "idols": ideas, religions or goals that are popular and powerful.

What powerful and popular ideas or goals have you noticed back in China? (e.g. material possessions, a stable family life, harmonious relationships with others...) List them:

Why do these things often make us feel small or weak as Christians? Why is it so hard to go against the flow?

Ephesians is written to Christians who felt the same pressure to doubt or feel ashamed of their faith in Jesus. **Pray** that God would use his word in Ephesians to keep you "faithful in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 1:1) in the face of these pressures.

On Day 1 we saw that Paul wants the Christians in Ephesus to stay “faithful in Christ Jesus”. Today we start to see what they need to know in order to stay faithful.

In verse 3 Paul exclaims: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”.

List all the blessings that Paul describes in v4-10:

v4:

v5:

v7:

v9:

Verse 3 tells us that these blessings are all “in Christ”: we enjoy them all because of Jesus.

Verse 3 also tells us that these blessings are all “in the heavenly places”. This phrase is used several times in Ephesians, and it refers to the **unseen spiritual reality**. These blessings that we have as Christians are unseen, in contrast to the powerful, tangible worship of Artemis in Ephesus. The picture on the right shows us the real situation of the Christians in Ephesus:

So in this passage it is like Paul gives the Ephesians a glimpse into what is happening in the heavenly places. They are blessed with every spiritual blessing, even though they cannot see these blessings. Paul’s tone is full of excitement and praise to God for his blessings. He writes these verses so that the Ephesian Christians will also be thrilled by the amazing blessings God has lavished on them.

How would this encourage the Ephesian Christians to stand firm in their faith?

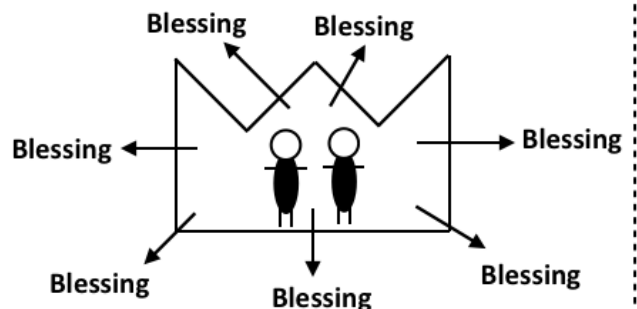
Think about the list you made on Day 1 of popular, powerful goals and ideas in China.

What would non-Christians around you say it means to be ‘blessed’?

As you adjust back to life in China, remind yourself of all the blessings you have in Christ. Why are these blessings better than the ones mentioned above? How does this give you confidence to stand firm as a Christian?

Spend time **praising** God for these blessings one by one, and **pray** that he would help you to be certain of them, even though they are unseen.

The Heavenly Places



In verse 3 we saw that we have “every spiritual blessing”. No matter how the first few days back home have gone, this is something to be very thankful for!

One of these blessings is that God has “made known to us the mystery of his will” (v9); he has told us his big plan.

What is this plan? (v10)

God’s plan has Christ at the centre. Everything that has ever existed in the whole universe will be brought together under the rule of Jesus (the word for “unite” in verse 10 has the idea of being united together under one authority).

What’s more, God’s plan is very very big! It stretches from before the beginning of creation (v4) right to the end of time (v10). It includes everything in the whole universe (v10). The goal of God’s plan is his glory: this is emphasised in 1:6,12,14.

Back home it may feel that God is distant and that Jesus is irrelevant to the events and people that surround you. But this passage tells us that everything that has ever happened in the whole world, throughout the whole of history, is all working towards achieving God’s big plan: for Jesus to be the ruler of the universe. And we are specially blessed, because God has told us this plan!

How does it make you feel to know that God has this big plan for the universe which will certainly be accomplished?

Think back to Day 1: What has made you feel small or weak as a Christian since returning home? Perhaps it’s the reaction of your family as you talk to them about your faith, or perhaps it’s as you see the ambitions and achievements of your former classmates, or something else...

Compare these things to God’s big plan: his ambitions and achievements. How does this give you confidence to stand firm as a Christian?

If you are not yet a Christian, studying Ephesians is a great chance to learn about what Christians believe. It teaches us that God has a big plan with Jesus at the centre. As you read Ephesians over the next few days, think about why God’s plan is so much more brilliant than all human plans or ambitions.

In these verses Paul continues to describe the spiritual blessings that we have in Christ in the heavenly places.

List the blessings mentioned here:

v11

v13

v14

Verse 11 says that Christians have “obtained an inheritance”. An “inheritance” is something precious that will be enjoyed in the future. The idea of an “inheritance” is very important in the Bible: throughout the Old Testament God promised to give his people a land as their inheritance, where they would enjoy security and blessing. By the New Testament we see that this inheritance refers to our eternal home with God in the perfect new world that he will create in the future (at “the fullness of time” as verse 10 describes it).

So as Christians we look forward to enjoying this eternal life with God, secure and blessed forever. But we’re not there yet - as we saw on Day 2, all these blessings are “in the heavenly places”, which means we can’t see them now. In verses 11-14 Paul emphasises why we can be certain of these blessings even though we can’t see them:

- Verse 11 tells us that God “predestined” us (i.e. he chose us in advance) to get this inheritance, and that God “does all things according to the counsel of his will”, which means that God does what he wants! This is a great comfort: God who controls everything that happens in the universe has decided that we will get this wonderful inheritance.

- Verses 13-14 tell the Ephesians that when they heard the gospel and believed in it they received the Holy Spirit. He is a “seal” and “guarantee” of their inheritance. Just as the Holy Spirit made them (and us) able to believe in the gospel for the first time, so he continues to work in us, strengthening our faith and helping us to keep trusting Jesus even though we don’t see him.

Although we cannot see our many blessings or our future inheritance yet, we can be certain that one day we will!

Why do we often find it so difficult to fix our eyes on our future inheritance: our eternal home with God?
Why do we sometimes doubt that we will really get there one day?

How does this passage help you to be certain of this inheritance?

What practical things can you do to remind yourself of all the blessings you have in Christ?

How can we remind other Christians?

(If you have already found other Christians back in China, think about how you could remind each other. If not, think about how you can keep in touch with Christians from your church overseas and remind each other)

Paul has told the Ephesians some amazing things in 1:1-14! If they really knew these things, it would transform them. If they really knew that they have every blessing... that they are part of God's big plan... that they can be certain of a perfect eternal future with God... then they would stand firm when everyone around them worshipped Artemis, a powerless god invented by people. If we really knew these things, then we would stand firm when everyone around us worships money, career, parents, children, etc. But sometimes it's just so hard to really know the things we know.

If we're Christians, we probably already know about our hope, God's inheritance and God's power. But do we *really* know them? Does this knowledge impact our daily lives: our thinking, feeling, actions, priorities, ambitions? It's hard to know these things because our physical eyes can't see them, they can only see the false gods around us (like Artemis in Ephesus). That's why Paul prays that these Christians would see with the eyes of their hearts (v18) - to see what's unseen, but wonderfully real and true. To see into "the heavenly places".

What does Paul pray for in these verses?

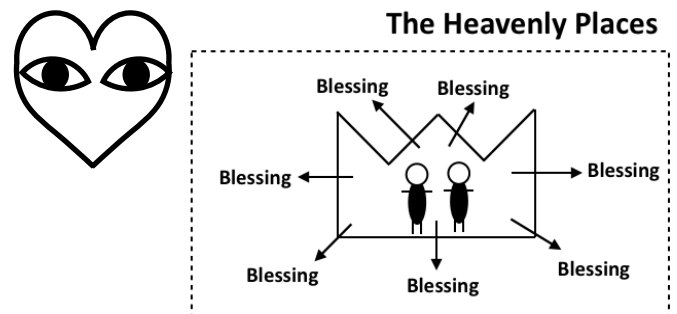
Paul prays for the Ephesian Christians to have **knowledge**: "wisdom", "revelation", "knowledge" and "having the eyes of your hearts enlightened" are all different ways of saying this. And there are three main things he wants them to know:

1. **Hope:** Hope is what we look forward to with certainty. Though we feel small and weak as Christians now, one day our faith will become sight, at "the fullness of time" when all things are united in Christ (see 1:10).
2. **Inheritance:** We hope for *our* inheritance, but this verse tells us that God also has an inheritance ("his glorious inheritance"). His inheritance is "the saints", which means Christians - us! So as we look forward to enjoying God forever, he also looks forward to enjoying us forever as we glorify him (see 1:6,12,14).
3. **Power:** As well as looking forward in hope to what God will do in the future, we also look back at the power he has already worked towards us. We will learn more about this in the next few days.

Physical eyes see:



Eyes of our hearts see:



Over the last few days, when has it been difficult to really know your **hope**, God's **inheritance** and God's **power**?

Why is it so important for us to know these things?

Spend some time praying that God would open the eyes of your heart and help you to know these things more. Pray this for other Christians you know too.

Power was a big deal in Ephesus. If you looked around with your physical eyes, Artemis looked powerful and Jesus did not. But in 1:18 Paul prayed that the Ephesian Christians would use the eyes of their hearts to see what is true in the “heavenly places” (1:3,18) - remember what that is? (see Day 2: the unseen spiritual reality)

In 1:20-2:22 Paul describes three different ways in which God has shown his mighty power. Today we’ll look at the first.

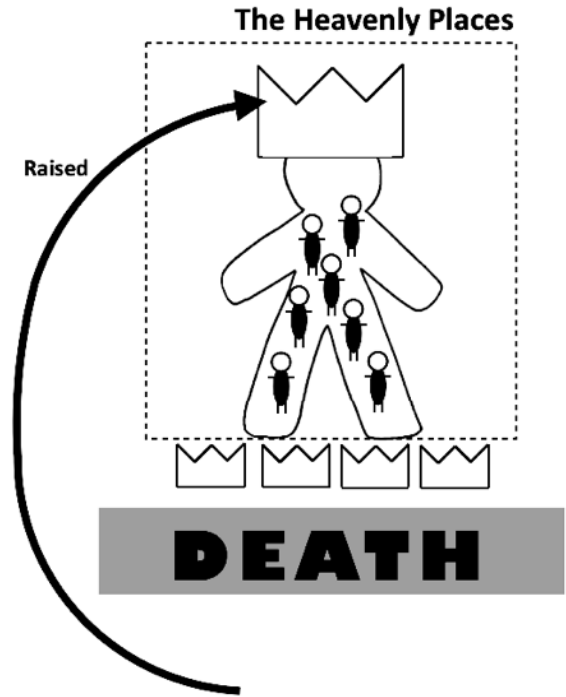
How has God’s power been demonstrated in Christ? (1:20-23)

In verses 21-23 we find the word “all” or “every” repeated lots of times! Paul wants to make clear that he’s talking about every kind of power: this includes human leaders, spiritual beings (like Satan), economic forces, prevailing worldviews (such as materialism or atheism), and everything else!

What is Jesus’ relationship to all other powers?

What is Jesus’ relationship to the church? What does that imply about *our* relationship to all these powers?

This diagram helps to show the power of Christ (represented by the big crown) over all other powers:



Think about the powerful things around you that make you feel small and weak as a Christian. How should this passage make you feel about these things?

Spend time praying that God would open the eyes of your heart and help you to really know that Jesus is more powerful than everything else.



In 2:1-10 Paul describes the second great demonstration of God's power. Advertisements often use before-after contrasts to highlight how powerful their product is, e.g. a diet regime, or a washing powder. This passage also uses a before-after contrast to highlight God's power! Today we will focus on the "before" part in 2:1-3, where Paul uses strong language to show the Ephesians how serious their situation was "before" Jesus:

- **Dead (v1):** It's hard to think of anything more hopeless and final than death. This was our condition because of sin.
- **Following the course of this world (v2):** This means going along with what everyone else is doing, following them in their worship of the Artemis-like idols of our culture. This feels easy and natural - but it is opposite to worshipping God.
- **Following Satan (v2):** Satan is "the prince of the power of the air". When we don't follow God, we are not free, and we are not neutral. We are following Satan.
- **Living in the passions of our flesh (v3):** We did whatever we wanted to do (selfishness, anger, lust, pride, etc etc) and ignored what *God* wanted us to do.
- **Children of wrath (v3):** Because of this rebellion against God, he was rightly angry at us. We faced certain punishment and distress on the day when he judges all people.

Stop and think: in what ways is this an accurate description of you before you followed Jesus?

If you are not yet a Christian, how does it show you why we all need Jesus?

This is a bleak picture. But wonderfully, these verses are all in the past tense. "You *were* dead... you *once walked*... we all *once lived*... we *were* by nature children of wrath". This was horribly true of us - but it is not any more. Tomorrow we will see what has changed!

Remember Paul's big aim in writing to the Ephesians: he wants them to stand firm as Christians when Jesus seemed less impressive than the gods of the people around them. Here Paul tells them a bit more of the spiritual reality going on behind the scenes. People worshipping other gods may seem strong and secure, but in reality they are dead in sin and enslaved to Satan. And we used to be like them (v2,3). But now that we have been rescued from this, why would we envy them?? Why would we wish that we could be like them again??

When was the last time you wished you could be like non-Christians? How does this passage help you to stand firm in Jesus at those times? When might you particularly need to remember this over the next few days?

Spend time praying that God would open the eyes of your heart and help you to know how hopeless our situation was before Jesus rescued us.

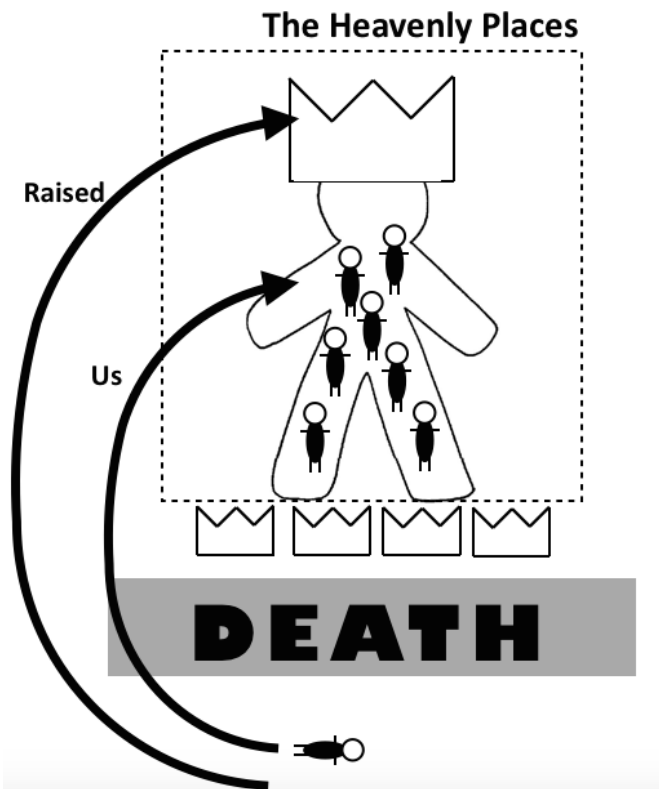


Yesterday we thought about a “before-after” comparison. In verses 4-7 we see the “after” part.

How does the situation described in v4-7 contrast with the situation in v1-3?

How does this display “the immeasurable greatness of God’s power” (1:19)?

In verses 1-3 the situation looked hopeless: we were dead in our sins, facing God’s anger. But just as God powerfully raised Jesus to life (see 1:20-23), so he has also raised us up together with Jesus and lavished love and kindness on us. Nothing could be more different!



Once again, in verse 6 Paul gives us a glimpse into the “heavenly places”: the unseen spiritual reality (1:3,20). What unseen thing are we shown here here? We are alive, and we are with Christ! You probably didn’t notice any physical change in yourself when you became a Christian, but spiritually everything changed. You were dead; now you are alive.

And verse 7 reminds us that there is even more to come. On Day 5 we thought about the importance of knowing our future hope, and here we see that in the future God will show even greater kindness to us - so great that Paul describes it as “immeasurable riches”. We can be certain of this hope, because God has already acted in mighty power to raise Christ from the dead, and to raise us up with Christ too.

Sometimes as Christians we can find ourselves measuring our identity by the standards of the world around us: making our family proud of us; finding a job that gives us high status; meeting other people’s expectations. These things can become more important than our identity in Christ.

This passage tells us that we were dead - but now we’re alive. We were facing God’s wrath - but now we’ve received his immeasurable kindness. What difference does it make to think of your identity in these terms?

Ask God to open the eyes of your heart and help you to know that in Jesus you have been brought from death to life.



“Grace” = an undeserved gift, freely given

Re-read Ephesians 2:1-10 and find all the places where Paul mentions God’s grace.

What does it mean that we have been “saved by grace”? Try to explain it in your own words.

Paul repeats the word “grace” three times in the space of four verses, then explains this idea again in verses 8-9. He really wants to emphasise that our being raised from death to life was 100% God’s work and 0% our own work. This makes sense when we remember how hopeless we were in the past: we were dead, and dead people can’t make themselves come back to life. It’s crazy to think that we could contribute anything to our salvation. In verse 10 we see that even the good things we do now as Christians are not actually our own work, they are the result of God’s work in us. He did it all.

Think back to our wonderful new identity in Christ which we read about yesterday.

Do you ever worry that you are not good enough to get so much kindness from God; that you don’t deserve to enjoy God’s great love for eternity?

How does this passage help when you feel that way?

God’s grace is wonderful news for us: it means we can be 100% certain that we really do have every spiritual blessing (1:3) and we really will get to our future inheritance and hope (1:11,14,18). Perhaps since being back home you have noticed some sin in yourself more clearly than before, maybe in your attitude to your family, or giving in to some of the pressures to act like the non-Christian world around us, or not giving God the place in your thoughts that he deserves, or something else. Be comforted to know that your salvation is a free gift from God, not a result of your own works. He has already raised you from death to life in Christ: no good thing you do can contribute to this, and no bad thing you do can take away from this.

This means that Christianity is completely different to every human religion. Religions teach that we need to be good enough or work hard enough in order for God to bless us, In contrast, the Bible teaches that we are not good enough, but God blesses us as an undeserved free gift because of Jesus.

How could you use this passage to explain to a family member or friend why Christianity is different from all other religions?

Community is very important to us. We all like to be part of the “in-crowd”, to be included, and we hate being “outsiders”, left out.

Which groups of people do you particularly want to be included and accepted by?

Community is an important part of God’s plan too. Ephesians 1:10 told us that God plans to unite everything together under Christ’s rule - this includes all God’s people living together for God’s glory. Throughout the Bible God has had a chosen people, whom he promised to bless, forgive, and live with. These people were the Jews, also known as Israel.

“Gentile” = a non-Jewish person

“Circumcision” = the physical sign of belonging to the Jewish people.

Read 2:11-22, focusing on verses 11-12. How does Paul describe the Ephesians before they were Christians?

In 2:1-10 Paul described the problem faced by everyone: all have sinned and therefore all are spiritually dead. But for the Ephesian Christians (and most of us too) there was another problem: they were Gentiles, which meant that they were outsiders to God’s community and to

his promises of hope, forgiveness and relationship with him. As verse 12 describes it, they were “strangers to the covenants of promise”. They (and we) were “separated... alienated.... far off” (v12,13).

We often take it for granted that God’s promises are for us, and so we don’t feel very amazed that we are included in God’s plan. Perhaps we even proudly assume that as Chinese people we must be particularly special to God. But this passage humbles us by reminding us that we had no right to be part of God’s people.

Think back to the groups that you particularly value being a part of - perhaps your family, classmates or work colleagues. Sometimes being a Christian means that we are rejected by these groups, or we feel left out or just a bit different to everyone else because of our values and behaviour.

Why is being left out of God’s people even more serious than being left out of any other group?

2:11-22 is another before-after contrast. Paul tells us how hopeless we were without Christ in order to show us the extent of what Christ has done.

How does this passage help you to see your need for Christ more deeply?

Yesterday we saw that as Gentiles the Ephesians were miles and miles away from God, cut off from all hope. Verse 13 then starts with the glorious words “But now...” and goes on to describe how the people who were far off have been brought near! It is clear in vv13-18 that this was all because of Jesus’ death.

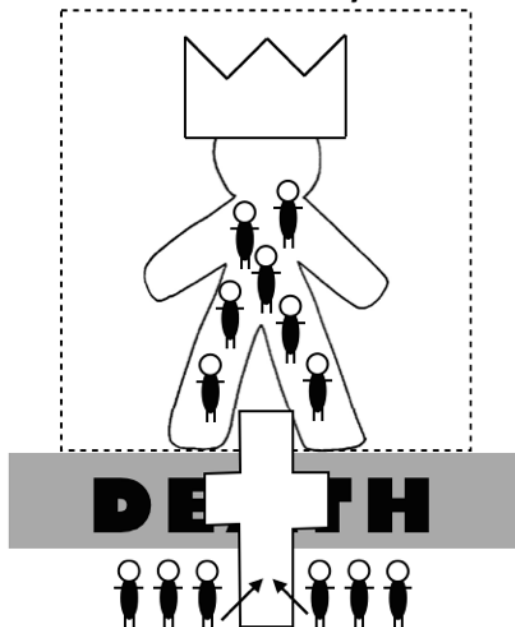
When Jesus came, he made a new way to relate to God: not through the Jewish laws, but through his own death in our place. The cross became the way for both Jews and Gentiles to be reconciled with God. No longer would people be counted as “insiders” or “outsiders” on the basis of being Jew or Gentile, because now everyone in Christ is an “insider”. Jesus’ death removed the barrier between people and God, and the barrier between Jews and Gentiles.

How did Jesus’ death make peace between Jews and Gentiles?

How did Jesus’ death make peace between people and God?

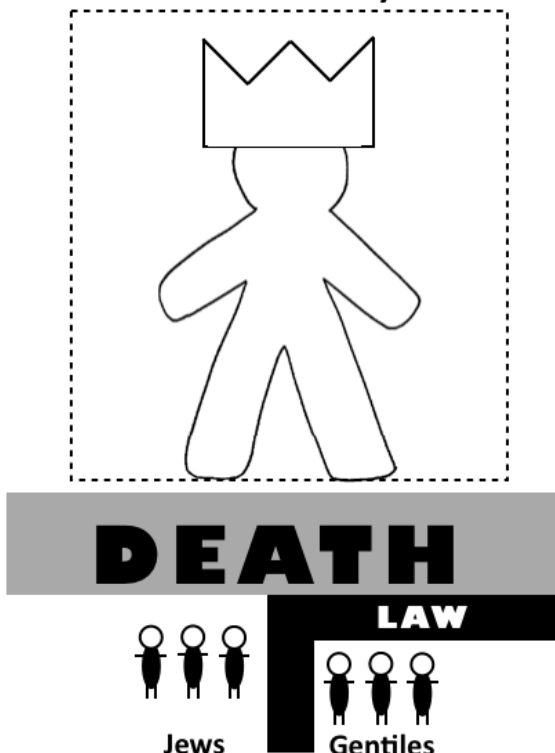
In the Old Testament, one of the clearest differences between Jews and Gentiles was that God had given the Jews laws to live by. If the Jews kept God’s laws, they could enjoy the blessings of relationship with God. The problem was that throughout the Old Testament the Jews failed again and again to keep these laws, so in the end Jews and Gentiles were both cut off from each other and cut off from God.

The Heavenly Places



Paul uses these before-after contrasts to help the Ephesian Christians to know the greatness of God’s power at work in them (1:19).

The Heavenly Places



Use your own words to describe what this passage teaches about God’s powerful work in you.

How does God’s powerful work in the past help you to be even more certain of your future hope (1:18)?

Spend time thanking God that Christ’s death has made you part of God’s people and reconciled you to him.

On Day 10 we thought about how terrible it is to be shut out of the community of God's people. Today we learn how wonderful it is to be part of this community.

In Ephesians 2:19-22, what different words does Paul use to describe our status now?

How does this contrast with our status before? (2:11-12)

Think about what a privilege it is to be each of these things:

- We are now "**citizens**": we belong to the kingdom of God, it is our home.
- We are "**members of God's household**": part of God's own family.
- We are part of God's "**temple**": the place where God lives. God has chosen to live in us!

Some returnees feel like they no longer belong to the communities they used to belong to: family, classmates, or society in general. Often it's our new values as Christians that make us feel shut out from these groups. The Ephesian Christians may also have felt this, and here Paul comforts them by reminding them of the community they now belong to.

Since being back in China, when have you felt insignificant and ashamed of your identity as a Christian?

Ask God to open the eyes of your heart and help you to know that in Christ you have been given the most privileged identity as a member of God's own family.



How could you use Ephesians 2:11-22 to encourage a Christian friend in the situation below?

Minmin works in a state-owned company. Her colleagues are all Party members and enjoy the benefits of that, including promotion opportunities. Minmin starts to regret that she is a Christian as it has become an obstacle to her career progression.

On Day 3 we learnt that God has a big plan for the whole universe - and that amazingly he has made that plan known to us and included us in it. In today's verses Paul talks about how we can know this "plan of the mystery" (v9).

Paul uses the word "mystery" a lot in this passage: he means something that is impossible to understand unless God reveals it.

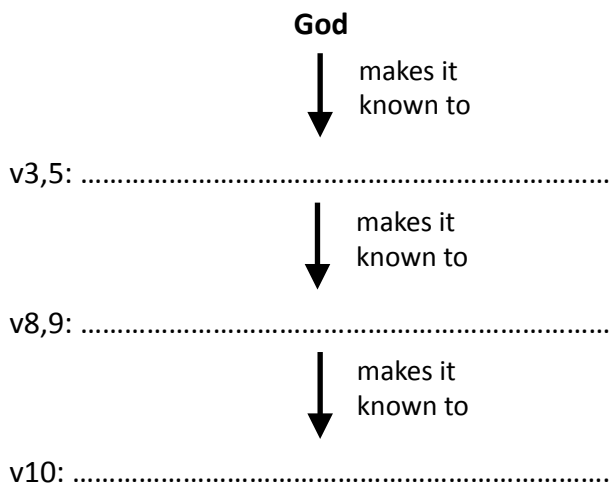
Sometimes we look at the world around us and it doesn't seem to make sense. Christians are a minority and the church seems unimpressive. But God is in control. He has a big plan to create a united people who worship Jesus together and will share in his perfect future inheritance. We can stand firm because we know the plan.

These verses tell us *how* we can know God's plan: verse 5 says that God revealed it to his apostles (ie the men chosen by Jesus to bear witness to him, such as Paul and the 12 disciples) and prophets (ie the people who wrote the Old Testament). Today we have the apostles' and prophets' writings recorded in the Bible.

What is this "mystery?" (v6).

Think back to what you have already read in chapters 1-2. How do these chapters help you to understand this "mystery"? Why is it such important news?

Going back to chapter 3, fill in the chart to see how this mystery has been made known:



We often struggle to set aside regular time to read the Bible. How has your pattern of regular Bible reading been since returning home? What makes it difficult?

How does this passage motivate you to read the Bible regularly?
(For example: the Bible reminds us of God's big plan for the universe, even when we can't see evidence of it in the world around us)

Yesterday we thought about how God reveals his plan to us. Today we will focus on the last stage in this process, described in 3:10:

Through the church, God makes known his wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Firstly, who are the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places”?

“The heavenly places”, already mentioned in 1:3, 1:20 and 2:6, are the unseen spiritual realm, so these are spiritual beings, such as angels and demons. Ephesians 6:12 refers to “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”, so it is likely that evil spiritual beings are particularly in view.

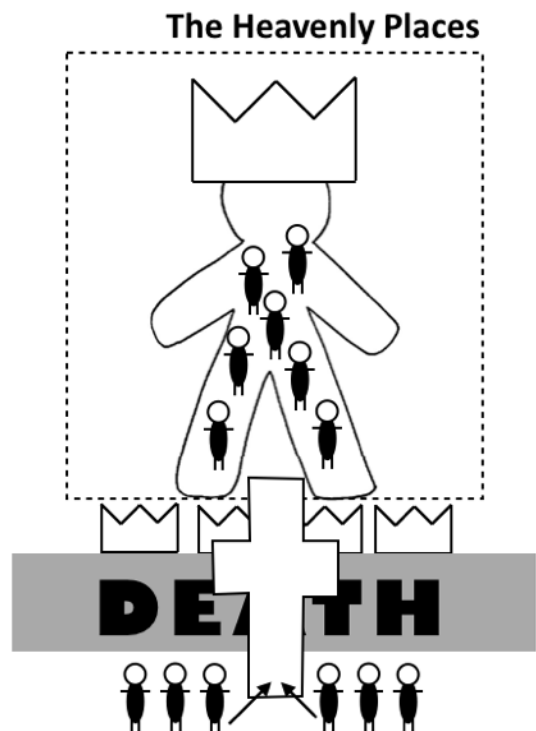
Verses 9-10 describe how, as the church (ie Christians) knows God’s plan, it reveals God’s wisdom to these spiritual beings. Think about the church’s role in God’s plan:

How does the church display God’s wisdom?

Think back to the “before-after” comparisons in chapter 2. God has taken people who were spiritually dead, evil, disobedient, enemies of him and enemies of each other, and made us alive, righteous, at peace with him and at peace with each other, united together in one body. He did all this through the death and resurrection of Jesus. So from an earthly perspective the church might just look like a collection of ordinary people meeting together to hear Bible teaching and sing songs, but from a spiritual perspective (“in the heavenly places”) the church is God’s masterpiece! It displays God’s great wisdom, power and love. Ephesians 1:10 tells us that God will one day unite everything in the universe under Jesus. He has already united the church together under Jesus - so we can have confidence that he will complete his big plan. We, the church,

demonstrate this to spiritual beings who can see us, though we can’t see them. Wow!

Remember this diagram? It shows us what’s really going on in “the heavenly places”. The church displays to spiritual powers that Jesus really does have authority over all things, even them! (1:21)



Sometimes we look down on the church. Especially as returnees, we’re often tempted to compare our church in China to the church we belonged to overseas. How should this passage impact your view of the church?

Next time you meet with others from your church, remind yourself of Ephesians 3:10: angels and demons are watching you and can see God’s wisdom displayed through you!

Ask God to open the eyes of your heart to help you see the church as he sees it: a picture of his wise plan for the universe.



In Ephesians 1-3 Paul has written at great length about God's plan for the universe, and what God has done to include us in that plan. Paul has told the Ephesian church, so now they know it, right? Well, not exactly. Today we see that knowledge is not a simple thing!

Back in 1:16-19 Paul writes that he prays for God to give them **knowledge** - of their hope and of God's power. Then Paul goes on to tell them what they need to know (1:20-3:13). Now, once more, he prays for **knowledge**: described here as Christ dwelling in their hearts through faith (v17), comprehending the breadth, length, height and depth (v18), and knowing Christ's love (v19).

What needs to happen to them so that they can know these things (see v16 and 18)?

Paul asks God to strengthen them **so that they know** the gospel truths he has just told them. This is surprising! There are lots of things that people might need strength for: physical strength to meet an exercise target, emotional strength to keep going when our boss puts pressure on us, moral strength to fight temptation to sin. But we don't normally think we need strength to know things. Surely we just need eyes, ears and brains?!

On Day 5 we considered that sometimes it is hard to really know the things we know. This is partly because these things are **unseen**: we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly

places (1:3) - amazing, but invisible. Christ is reigning at God's right hand in the heavenly places (1:20) - all-powerful, but invisible. We have been rescued from being God's enemies, dead in sin, to being his beloved children, seated with him in the heavenly places (2:6) - God's work is mighty, but invisible. Now, God's wisdom is displayed through the church in the heavenly places (3:10) - glorious, but invisible to us.

But we also need God's strength to know these things because they are **too big** for us to understand. Verse 19 says that Christ's love "surpasses knowledge" - yet Paul prays that they would know it! Christ's love is at the heart of God's plan: the plan is achieved through Christ's great sacrifice in dying and rising for us (1:7, 2:5-7, 2:13-16). So when Paul prays for them to know Christ's love, he is praying for them to know God's plan as described in chapters 1-3.

When we stop and think about God's plan, it should blow our mind. It is a plan made before the beginning of time stretching all the way into eternity. It is a plan for all things everywhere: on earth and to the very edges of outer space. It is a plan that brings evil people from hopeless death to glorious life. Our minds are too weak to comprehend this. We need God to strengthen us.

Use Paul's prayer in these verses to ask God to give you strength so that you can know his loving plan more deeply. Pray this for other Christians that you know too.

Spend time thinking about the vast dimensions of God's plan as described above, and praising him for it.

Use your own words to summarise the main things that Paul has written about God’s plan in chapters 1-3. You might find it helpful to look back at the diagram, or to summarise Paul’s main point in each of the following sections:

1:1-14

1:15-23

2:1-10

2:11-22

3:1-13

Look back to the list you made on Day 1 of powerful, popular ideas around you that can make you feel weak as a Christian - like the goddess Artemis for the Ephesian Christians. Take them one by one and consider:

How do the truths described in Ephesians 1-3 give you confidence as a Christian when you face these things?

Which of the truths from Ephesians 1-3 do you find hardest to deeply believe/know?

Use Paul’s prayers in Ephesians 1:16-19 and 3:14-21 to ask God to strengthen you to know these truths more deeply. Ask God to open the eyes of your heart so that you see his wise plan for the universe more clearly than you see these “Artemis” things around you.



In Ephesians 1-3 Paul wrote about lots of things he wanted the church to *know* about God's plan. In chapter 4-6 he focuses more on how they should *live* in response to these things ("therefore" in verse 1 highlights this link). These verses are a bridge between the two ideas, encouraging the church to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called".

What qualities does Paul mention in verses 2-3?

How would knowing the truths in chapters 1-3 produce these qualities in people?

For example, knowing that none of us deserve to be God's children and are all saved by grace (2:1-10) helps us to treat others with humility.

In verse 3 Paul writes that they should be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace". Note that he uses the word "maintain", not "create": God has already created unity between Christians through the gospel (as described in 2:11-22). Verses 4-6 remind us of the basis of our unity; all the things we share together that make us one. This is the foundation that our unity is based on.

Think about the other Christians you have met already back home. Maybe you feel they are quite different to you, and it is hard to love them. But are they people who have faith in the "one Lord", Jesus? If so, then what you have in common with them is more important than any differences in age, background, education, etc.

Read through verses 4-6 slowly and think about all the ways in which you are one with these other Christians.

If you have not yet met other Christians back home, what concrete steps can you take to meet some? For example, ask Christians you know overseas if they can introduce you to anyone.

Which of the truths from chapters 1-3 could help you to act with "humility, gentleness, patience, love" towards these other Christians?

Ask God to help you to know these truths more deeply, and that this would strengthen your unity with other Christians. Pray for them too.

Yesterday's passage showed us that unity in the church is very important. Yet it is often really hard in practice! So what is God's strategy for keeping the church united and growing in a healthy direction? This passage says some hugely significant things which could dramatically impact how we view church and our role in it! In summary:

God builds his church by giving it Bible teachers (v11), to equip all Christians for ministry (v12)

Today we will focus on the first half of this summary, and tomorrow focus on the second half.

Verses 7-8 tell us that Christ has given gifts to the church, and verse 11 explains what these gifts are: people who teach God's word (as we saw on Day 13, the apostles and prophets were the people who wrote the Bible. We don't have them amongst us today - but we do have the words that they wrote, which the "evangelists" and "shepherd-teachers" teach).

So Christ's gift is Bible teachers. Given the content of Ephesians so far, this point is obvious really. If the big thing that Christians need in order to stand firm is knowledge of God's plan, then it makes sense that what a church most needs is people who work hard to understand what God has said about his plan, and who then teach this to the church.

The results of their ministry are huge!

- Verse 13 tells us that it produces "unity of the faith", because Christians are strengthened in knowledge of the things that make us one (see 4:4-6)

- Verse 14: we will no longer be "children", who are easily led astray by what we hear. The world around us is constantly telling us that "Artemis" (representing the gods of our society) should command our energy and shape our goals. Only God's word will remind us of God's big plan which is what we need to keep standing firm.
- Verses 13,15: hearing the truth helps us to grow in a healthy direction: becoming more and more like Christ, getting closer and closer to the great goal of history (1:10). Wouldn't it be wonderful if our churches were more like Jesus? This happens through faithful teaching.

So, what should this mean for us?

Firstly, make sure you're being well taught. If you are still looking for a church or deciding which city to settle in, let this passage shape your decision. As Christians, we should prioritise finding a church where the leaders work hard to teach God's word correctly.

Secondly, be a good listener! Whenever we hear a sermon or attend a Bible study we should be eager to learn, as this is how God grows the church. What will it mean for you to be a good listener?

Further Reading:

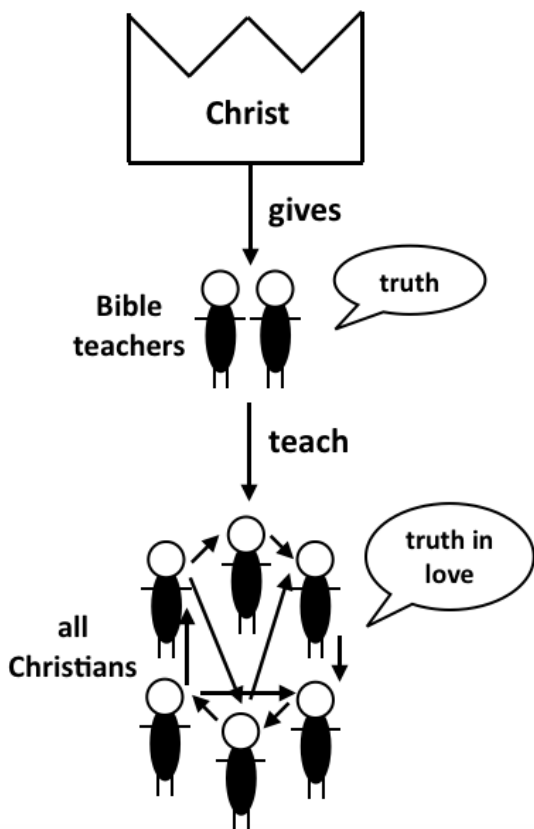
This article translated into Chinese has helpful advice on how to listen to sermons:
<http://cn.9marks.org/toolkit/listenup/>

Yesterday we saw that:

God builds his church by giving it Bible teachers...

... but this is only half of the story. Re-read these verses and consider: Who does the work of ministry?

Verse 12 tells us: it is “the saints” - all Christians - who minister to each other. Verse 15 explains how we are to do this: “speaking the truth in love”. We can illustrate this in a diagram:



This means that no Christian can be a passive church member. Yesterday we learnt that we have a responsibility to make sure we are

taught well and are listening well. But today we see that we also have a responsibility to teach each other. We should not just come to church to learn things for ourselves, but to learn things that we can encourage others with. We are all constantly hearing voices from the world, telling us how great “Artemis” is; tempting us to pursue earthly possessions, reputation, relationships, etc, as our main goal. This means that we need other Christians to remind each other that these are false gods and to point each other to God’s huge plan for the universe.

So now we have the full picture:

God builds his church by giving it Bible teachers to equip all Christians for ministry

How can we do this in practice? Here are a few ideas:

Talk to others at your church about the sermon you have heard that week - perhaps informally over a meal after church, or you could meet with one or two others to discuss and pray together regularly.

Invest in relationships with others at church: as we listen to others and get to know them we will better know what “truth” they need to hear, and we will be able to say it to them “in love”.

Talk to others about the things you identified on Day 1 that make you feel small or weak as Christians. Use God’s truth to remind each other that God’s plan in Christ is so much more important than these things.

What other things could you do to “speak the truth in love” to other Christians?

This passage still follows on from 4:1, where Paul urged the Christians in Ephesus to live lives worthy of their calling. In 4:17 he says this means *not* being like the Gentiles (he uses ‘Gentiles’ here to mean people who are outsiders to Christ, i.e. non-Christians).

In what ways are non-Christians and Christians different to each other? Complete the table:

	non-Christians	Christians
minds/ hearts		
actions		

But when we became Christians, everything changed! First our minds were renewed: we “*learnt Christ*” (v20), we “*were taught in him*” (v21), we now understand the truth. This new mind enables us to live new lives and become more and more like God himself (v24). The before-after contrast is so great that it changes every part of our lives.

In chapters 1-3 we saw that Paul really really wants the Ephesian church to deeply know the truth about God’s plan in Christ. In 4:7-16 we saw that Christians are to remind each other of this truth. Here we see that we can also use our lives to display God’s plan: as the Ephesian Christians looked around at each other, they would see people whose lives had been transformed by the truth they know about Jesus. This tangible change can give them (and us!) confidence in the power of the gospel when it looks weak in comparison to the powers of the non-Christian world.

What is the link between our minds/hearts and our actions?

This passage explains that Christians should live completely different *lives* to non-Christians because our *minds* are completely different to theirs.

This is like the before-after contrasts of chapter two. We *were* alienated from God (4:18, see 2:12) and all his blessings because of our rebellion against him. At that time we rejected the truth about God, our understanding was “darkened” (4:18) and our hearts were hardened. This darkened attitude to God led to lives that were displeasing to him (4:19).

Think back to the big truths Paul wrote about in Ephesians 1-3. How do these encourage you to “put off your old self” and “put on the new self”?

How have you seen other Christians’ lives transformed by the truth of the gospel? How does this help to open the eyes of your heart and give you confidence in God’s big plan?



In these verses Paul starts to get very practical! List the different things he tells them to do:

Yesterday we learnt that it is knowing the truth about Christ that transforms us to live like Christ. Here Paul uses two main truths to encourage the reader to live differently to the world:

1. Verse 25: We are all members of one body in Christ. Paul told us this in 2:11-22 and revisited it in 4:4-6, 11-16.

How does knowing that you are one with other Christians encourage you to do the things mentioned in 4:25-30?

2. Verse 30: We have been sealed by the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption. Back in 1:13-14 Paul wrote that the Holy Spirit guarantees to us that we will one day enter

God's promised inheritance. Since God himself is living in us by his Spirit (as we saw in 2:22), we should live as people who belong to God's eternal kingdom, and not live like non-Christians who belong to this world (as we saw yesterday in verses 17-19). The Holy Spirit is deeply hurt when we live as if we were not Christians.

How does knowing that you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit encourage you to do the things mentioned in 4:25-30?

Many returnees are surprised to find how much they struggle with **anger** after going back home. New pressures from family, the environment, work colleagues, etc can reveal an ugly side of us that we find hard to control. If anger is a struggle for you, take today as an opportunity to ask for God's help to do as he says in verses 26-27: to not sin when you are angry (for example, by hurting others with your words), and to resolve your anger by the end of the day.

Perhaps it is something else from today's passage that challenged you. Ask God to help you to remember the truth, and so to live in a way that honours him.

As with yesterday’s passage, list how Paul tells the Ephesian Christians to act. Note the reasons he gives for acting in this way, and think about any specific ways these instructions could apply in your own life:

Actions	Reason (if given)	Application for you
4:31		
4:32		
5:1		
5:2		

Some of the instructions here are specific, while others are very general, meaning that we need to think hard about how they might impact our actions. 5:1 is worth reflecting on, though it is easy to skip over because it is so broad in scope. Perhaps you have recently moved back home with your parents; no matter what, you are almost certainly aware of their influence. We want to please our parents because of all they have done for us, and to act in a way that honours them. This verse tells us that God is our Father, and we are to think of ourselves as his “beloved children”.

We saw in 4:11-16 that Christians grow to maturity together, not in isolation. Find a Christian friend who you can read today’s verses together with (preferably someone you see regularly now, but otherwise talk to one of your friends overseas).

Talk about what has personally challenged you from these verses.

Commit to praying for each other and to speaking God’s truth in love to each other (4:15) to help you make progress in these areas.

Think about what it means for God to be your Father who loves you. How should this impact your goals and ambitions, and how you act day by day?

Day 20 (4:17-24) showed us how different we are to non-Christians. In today's passage Paul emphasises this contrast again by saying that we used to be "darkness" but now we are "light in the Lord" (v8). What do we learn about these two different groups of people and how they act? Fill in the table:

Darkness	Light

Paul expects Christians to be radically different to their society. The two areas emphasised here are sexual immorality (in the Bible this means any sexual activity outside of marriage between one man and one woman) and covetousness. Money and sex are still two of the areas today where our society's standards are furthest from God's standards. Our culture says: "If it feels good, do it"... "You need to have the latest phone/bag/car etc"... "Be like everyone else"...

The message of these verses is "Don't *act* like them because you *are not* like them". In 2:1-10 Paul described the huge change that happened in us when we started following Jesus: we were "sons of disobedience" and "children of wrath" (2:2-3, see 5:6), but now we are God's beloved children, created in Christ Jesus to do good works (2:4,10). We were spiritually dead, but now we are alive - so it would be crazy to keep living as we did before. Our new identity means that certain actions are "proper" (v3) while others are "out of place" for us as Christians (v4).

Paul uses the image of light and darkness to help us understand this: light and darkness are not only opposite; they *cannot* exist together. Similarly, we *cannot* keep living immoral lives once we have become God's children. We are to be "in the world, but not of the world".

Since returning home, how have you seen sexual immorality and covetousness in the society around you? How have you been personally tempted by these things?

How can you make sure that you "take no part in" these things (v11)?

Re-read Ephesians 2:1-10 to remind yourself of your new identity in Christ. How does this motivate you to "walk as children of light" (v8)?

These verses continue to apply the teaching from yesterday's passage: we can see this from the word "then" in v15. They tell us more about how our new identity as children of light should impact how we live.

Verses 15-17 tell us to live in a "wise" way, and explains that the key to this is understanding "the will of the Lord".

Re-read Ephesians 1:9-10. In these verses, what is God's will?

God's will is to one day unite everything in all creation together under Jesus' rule. This means that a wise life is a life lived in light of God's longterm plan for the universe. Unlike non-Christians around us who are living for pleasure and prosperity now, in these "evil" days (v16), we should be using our lives for things that will last eternally.

Another important theme is thankfulness - this is emphasised in verse 20 and was also introduced in verse 4.

Read Ephesians 2:1-10 again. What is there to give thanks for from these verses?

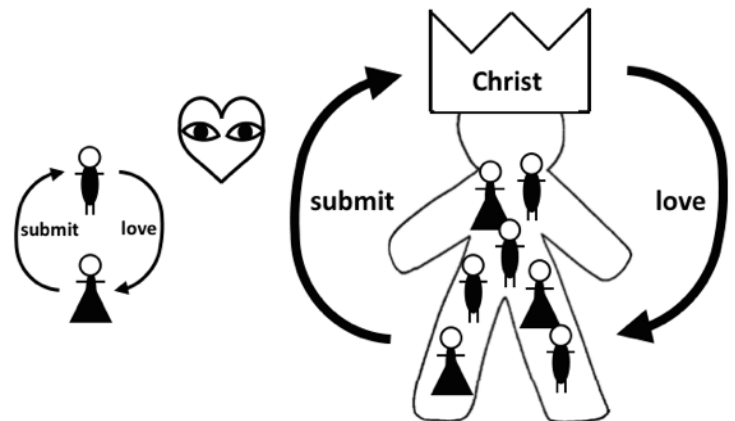
Why do you think being thankful helps us to live "wise" lives?

Back in Ephesians 2 Paul emphasised that all the blessings we have in Jesus are thanks to God's work - we were helpless to do anything for ourselves. So as we give thanks to God we are reminded of what he has done and we give him the glory for it. Verse 19 describes one way in which we can express our thankfulness: we sing about God and his work to each other and to him.

What else can you do to make thankfulness a bigger part of your life?

Spend time giving thanks to God for the his powerful work in us, remembering the before-after contrasts in 1:19-2:22.

At first glance this just looks like a passage about how husbands and wives should relate to each other. But it is so much more! We know that Paul’s big aim in writing to the Ephesian church was to help them know God’s plan, and in this passage Paul helps them to see how they can display God’s plan in their day-to-day relationships. Read on to find out how!



Tomorrow we will think more about how this passage should shape our attitude to marriage, but today let’s meditate on what it teaches us about our relationship with Jesus.

How are husband and wife to treat each other?

Why?

Paul is clear that wives and husbands have different roles in marriage, and these roles mirror the relationship between the church (us!) and Christ. Wives are to willingly submit to husbands as the church submits to Christ, and husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church (a love which was supremely shown in dying to save us).

But Paul takes the teaching even further in v31-32. Verse 31 quotes from Genesis 2:24, which describes the first marriage in history, between Adam and Eve. But in v32 Paul says that this is actually talking about Christ and the church! Do you see how radical this is? - Paul says that God created marriage in order to help us understand our relationship with Jesus!!

Back on Day 1 we thought about how being a Christian can be hard because God’s plan in Christ is invisible, not tangible and flashy like the religions and worldviews around us. On Day 5 we learnt that we need to use the eyes of our hearts to see the blessings we have in Christ. But here we find that God has given us a “visual aid” to help us grasp his plan: namely, marriage. As we look at Christian marriages, we see a tiny glimpse of God’s glorious, eternal plan.

Think about the description of how husbands should love their wives in verses 25-30. How does this help you understand Jesus’ love for us, his people?

How does it help us understand what it means for us to submit to Jesus?

Think about ways that you have seen this kind of willing submission and sacrificial love in the marriages of Christians you know.

Give thanks for how this helps us understand God’s plan more deeply.

Yesterday we learnt that God's design for marriage is that it displays the relationship between Jesus and the church. So how should this impact marriage relationships in practice?

A word to wives...

The instruction is clear: you are to submit to your husband. "Submission" is an unpopular idea for many people, but the submission described in this passage is a beautiful thing, not demeaning or oppressive. Submission doesn't mean being silent and passive, but rather joyfully accepting that God has made your husband the "head" i.e. leader of your family. A submissive wife seeks to support her husband as he leads the family in a way that honours God, rather than opposing and undermining him.

What can you do to support your husband in serving God?

(See 1 Peter 3:1-6 for instruction for wives whose husbands are not Christians)

A word to husbands...

You are to love your wife as Christ loved the church. This is more than buying her presents! Firstly, we see the **extent** of this love: you are to completely give up your life for her, just like Jesus died for us on the cross. Your wife's interests should come above your own, and you should be prepared to make any sacrifice for her sake. Secondly, we see the **aim** of this love: just as Christ died to cleanse us and save us, your love for your wife should aim to help her grow in holiness and stand firm in Christ's salvation.

What can you do in practice to help your wife grow in Christ?

A word to unmarried Christians...

If you are not married, this passage has lots to say to you! Firstly, it helps us know what kind of person to marry. The big aim of marriage is to display the relationship between Christ and the church - so when you're considering starting a relationship with someone, think about whether or not your marriage could honour Christ in this way. Would the person you're thinking about seek to be the kind of submissive wife or loving husband described above? Certainly, if they are not a Christian they will not be able to model their relationship with you on Christ's relationship with the church - this is one of the reasons why it's so inappropriate for a Christian to marry a non-Christian.

This might be difficult for you - upon returning home, many returnees face great pressure from their parents to start thinking about marriage, and parents can struggle to accept that their child would only marry another Christian. So it is very important to remember verse 32: marriage is a good thing, but not the ultimate thing. It is a little temporary picture of the real, eternal marriage relationship between the church and Christ. So if you're not married, you don't need to feel that you are missing out - you have an intimate relationship with Jesus, the Lord of all.

Even when you feel weak and under pressure from family, society and yourself, ask God to open the eyes of your heart to remember your amazing place in God's plan.



Paul really wants the Ephesian church to **know God’s plan** - to think about it whatever they’re doing, wherever they go, whoever they’re with. So he applies it to all the relationships in their day-to-day life so that they just can’t get away from it! In the previous passage we saw how relationships between wives and husbands particularly reveal something of the glorious relationship between the church and Christ. In this passage Paul turns to relationships between parents and children. This is also an area of our lives where we can show that Christ is Lord - another unpacking of 5:21 “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”.

Verses 1 and 2 give the general principle: we are to “obey” and “honour” our parents. This is a “right” way to act, and it is what honours our Lord Jesus. When we become adults we are not to obey our parents as unquestioningly as a young child would, yet we should still respect our parents as people whom God has put in a position of authority over us.

As we seek to honour our parents it should be Jesus who is at the forefront of our minds - this is an opportunity for us to learn more and more deeply that he is our “head”, ruling with authority over all creation (as we saw in 1:20-23). Note that we are to obey our parents “in the Lord” - our primary loyalty is to Jesus, so our obedience to parents mustn’t compromise our obedience to Jesus.

In what areas have you struggled to honour and obey your parents since returning home?

- Consider practical steps you can take to honour your parents. Here are some ideas:
- Take time to talk to your parents about your life, explaining to them the things they don’t understand rather than becoming angry and frustrated at them. Or perhaps even write them a letter!
 - If they are not Christians, think about how to help them understand your faith in Jesus - you could offer to read a gospel with them and discuss it one chapter at a time (for example, using these notes on John’s Gospel: <http://www.theword121.com/buyordownload> - Chinese PDF at the bottom of the webpage)
 - Involve them in your life - for example, introduce them to some of your Christian friends.
 - Try to understand their point of view: why do they want what they want for you?
 - They may be worried that being a Christian means that you will no longer work hard to look after yourself (and them!). Show them that you are taking responsibility for your life.

... As you seek to do this, keep remembering the lordship of Jesus as described in Ephesians 1!

If you already have children, or are thinking of starting a family soon, pay attention to verse 4! Your chief responsibility as a parent is to teach your children about Jesus. Talk to your spouse (and perhaps others at church) about how you can make this a priority.

Here Paul focuses on another relationship that would have been common in the Ephesian church: slaves and masters (in New Testament times it was normal for households to have slaves who often enjoyed good relationships with their masters). As before, Paul describes how to honour Christ in these relationships. He pays particular attention to attitude and motivations.

Fill in the table:

	Action/Attitude	Reason
Slaves		
Masters		

Again and again it is emphasised that in their day-to-day work slaves are to think of themselves as working for Christ, not for human approval, and therefore to work wholeheartedly, knowing that Christ sees and rewards what is done to honour him. The same principle is true for masters - they will also give an account to Christ, and therefore should also honour Jesus in how they treat their slaves.

In our society the slave-master relationship is not a common one! However, many of the principles here can be applied to the relationship between worker and employer. While we are not required to obey our boss as unquestioningly as slaves were to obey their masters, we can all apply this attitude of working wholeheartedly as if working for Christ to our day-to-day activity. We know how tempting it is to seek to do the bare minimum, or to work hard only when the boss is watching, or to grumble about our work... or about our boss!

How would having the attitude described in this passage impact how you do your work?

How would it impact the way you treat those above and below you in your workplace?

Often we think that work is all about ourselves - helping us achieve what we want personally or for our family. Or we think that it is a distraction from Jesus. Next time you go to work (or as you apply for jobs if you have not yet started working), think about how your work can be an opportunity to display that Christ is your Lord.

Do you ever watch films with battle scenes in them and imagine that you were there fighting: constantly in danger, always alert, every moment matters, one false move could be fatal. Not only concerned for yourself, but for others on your side: watching them fight, and watching some of them fall. It can leave us thinking, "I'm so glad I don't have to fight like that!"

And so this passage is surprising and alarming. It tells us we **are** in a battle, and we must prepare ourselves for it: "Put on the whole armour of God..." (v11)

In this battle, who is attacking us? (v11, 12)

Re-read Ephesians 1:9-10 and 3:10. Why do you think that Satan is so opposed to Christians?

On Day 14 we saw that the church is God's masterpiece: it demonstrates to spiritual beings that God's plan will certainly be completed; all authority will be brought under Jesus' feet. The devil and other evil spiritual beings are determined to sabotage God's plan, and so they aim their attacks at... us. The church. They would love to stop us displaying God's wisdom and glory, to make us turn away and come back under their rule (as we once were, 2:2). They want to stop us standing firm as Christians - and so Paul's repeated call in this passage is to "stand"!! (v11,13,14)

The good news is that God has given us everything we need to stand firm, and tomorrow we will consider *how* to stand firm. But today, let's spend time reflecting on the fact that we are in a spiritual battle.

How often do you think about the fact that you are in a battle, with a powerful enemy attacking you?

We are often anxious about many "dangers", such as disappointing our family, failing to find a suitable job, or remaining single after most of our friends are married. Yet we rarely think about our greatest danger: failing to stand firm as a Christian.

How might Satan tempt you to stop standing firm?

Consider how Satan might use the "gods" of people around you - the things you identified on Day 1 - to stop you from standing firm. How might he tempt you to think like the non-Christian world around you, to want the things that they want? How might he tempt you to act like the non-Christian world around you?

Praise God that we have "the strength of his might" (v10) to help us stand firm. And so pray with confidence that he would help you to stand firm against these dangers.

Yesterday we thought about how this passage is a warning to us: We're being attacked by Satan! We're in danger of failing to stand firm! But this passage is ultimately a reassurance: God has given us all that we need to stand firm. We have "the whole armour of God" (v11,13). Think back to the battle scene described yesterday: imagine that you had impenetrable armour to wear that guaranteed you 100% protection. No one could hurt you. Then the battle wouldn't be scary; you could laugh at the enemy's attacks.

As Christians, we have this impenetrable armour - so what is it? Verses 14-18 name different aspects of it: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God, prayer. Since this is the end of Paul's letter, we should look to earlier chapters of Ephesians to help us understand what Paul means by these things.

Read Ephesians 1:13. What links can you find with the description of the armour of God in 6:14-18?

How does this help us understand how to put on this armour?

Back in Ephesians 1 we learnt that as Christians we have every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus (look back to Days 2-4 if you need a reminder), and that we received the Holy Spirit as a proof of this *when we heard and believed the gospel*. It's the gospel that saved us, and it's the gospel that we must keep returning to so that we will stand firm each day. We need to keep hearing the gospel and believing it.

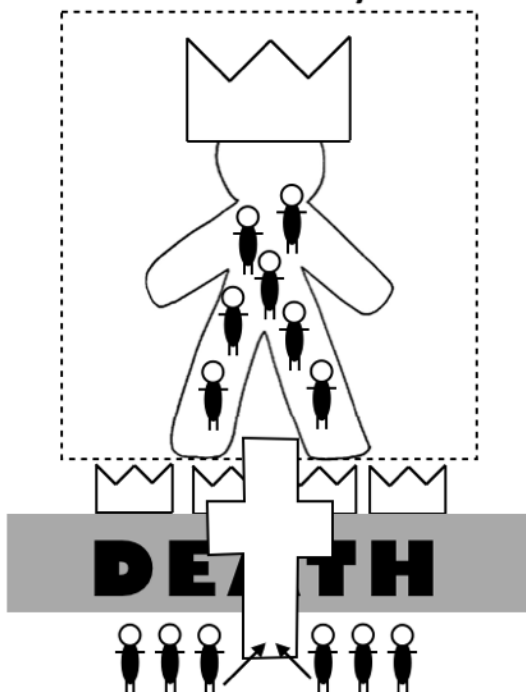
This shouldn't surprise us - it's what we have learnt over and over again in Ephesians! In chapters 1-3 Paul **tells** them the great scope of God's gospel plan. He doesn't only tell them; in 1:15-19 and 3:14-21 he **prays** that they would know it. Then in 4:11-16 he tells them to **remind** each other of this plan. Then in 4:17-6:9 he tells them to **live** in a way that displays this plan. Here, at the end of the book, Paul reminds us why knowing God's plan is so important: it is our impenetrable armour. Knowing God's plan is the only way to keep standing firm.

Let's think about how this works. Remember the areas you identified yesterday (in answer to the question "How might Satan tempt you to stop standing firm?"). How would knowing God's plan (as described in Ephesians 1-3) help you to withstand that temptation?

Here is one example: After returning home you may face great pressure to focus on your career. It's what your parents want for you and it's what everyone else is pursuing. It's tempting to shape your whole life around your career development, to let that determine how you spend your time, how you treat other people, etc. Gradually, Satan can use this to make you feel that the gospel promises are too distant and abstract, to stop meeting regularly with other Christians, to stop speaking to colleagues about Jesus, etc. But when we put on God's armour by remembering God's plan, we are reminded that in Jesus we have every eternal blessing, while the blessings of a successful career are only temporary. We remember that we have been rescued from death to life and given a precious new identity as part of God's people: this is so much more valuable than any status or achievement we could earn through our work.

As we read Paul’s closing greeting to the church in Ephesus, we will focus on just two words: “love incorruptible” (v24). Paul wrote this letter to strengthen the Ephesian church so that their love for Jesus would indeed be “incorruptible”: that they would continue to love Jesus and trust him for the rest of their lives on earth and for all of eternity. In this letter we’ve learnt that God keeps us standing firm in love for Jesus by opening the eyes of our heart to know his great plan: to unite everything in all creation together under Jesus Christ (1:10). We have tried to summarise the main aspects of this in the diagram:

The Heavenly Places



The big message of Ephesians can be summed up as: **Stand firm by knowing God’s plan**. The following reflection questions will help you respond to this big lesson from Ephesians; you may find it useful to return to these questions regularly over the next few weeks and months.

Do you really believe that knowledge of God’s plan is the most important thing you need to keep going as a Christian?

Practically, how can you keep knowing God’s plan day by day? (You might find it helpful to draw your own version of the picture illustrating chapters 1-3)

God has put Christians together in the church so that we can help each other to stand firm. How can you help other Christians to know God’s plan? How can other Christians help you to know God’s plan?

Spend time praying that God would strengthen you and other Christians you know to stand firm by knowing God’s plan. You could use Paul’s prayers in 1:15-19 and 3:14-21 as the basis for your prayers.



What Next...?

Hopefully as you read through Ephesians over the last month you have experienced the power of God's word strengthening you to stand firm as a Christian. As we saw in Ephesians 6:10-20, standing firm is a daily battle, and therefore we need to read and think about God's word every day. So what will you read next...?

Ephesians 4:7-16 taught us the importance of listening to sermons - as part of your regular Bible reading you could spend time re-reading the Bible passages you hear taught at church each week and thinking more deeply about how they should change your thinking and your living.

The "Sea Turtles" website has resources for personal and small group Bible study specially aimed at returnees, as well as links to other websites: <http://www.seaturtles.org.uk>

Many of the questions in these notes could be used to help you reflect on any Bible passage - as you read the Bible yourself you could ask yourself questions such as: What is the main idea of this Bible book/ Bible passage? What was the situation of the original reader? How would this passage help them? How am I similar to them - and so how does it help me? How should it impact how I view God/the world/myself/my family? If my thinking was changed in this way, how would that impact my life?

Talk to other Christians about how they try to read the Bible regularly, and ask if they can recommend any helpful resources. It is often a battle to keep this a daily habit, but it is a battle worth fighting!