



**EMBRACING
YOUR**

IDENTITY
IN CHRIST

BLESSED | SAVED | AFFLICTED | HEARD | GIFTED | **NEW | VICTORIOUS | LOVED | HOPEFUL** NBC 2016

‘Embracing your identity in Christ’

Home Group Studies

STUDY ONE | I am blessed

‘There are few things that stir affections, intensify worship, and change the way we interact with God and others like understanding our identity in Christ. Almost all that robs us of vitality in life and faith is a fundamental misunderstanding about who we are in Christ.’ [Matt Chandler, pastor of Village Church and author of The Explicit Gospel]

‘I spent years in ministry for Christ without understanding my identity in Christ. I know now I was not alone. When we place our identity in anything but our relationship with Jesus, we have built our future on a platform that could crumble at any moment. When, by the grace of God, we understand who we are in Christ, everything else can crumble and we will still be standing.’ [Sheila Walsh, speaker and author of God loves Broken People.]

Getting started

In what types of things do people seek to find their identity today? In what things have you personally sought your identity?

Read Ephesians 1:1-14

- 1. Paul addresses this letter ‘To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus’ [v2]**

Who are the saints? What does it mean to be a saint?

What do you think it means to be ‘in Christ’?

2. Paul is emphatically clear that any blessings we have are a result of being in Christ. Christ is mentioned 14 times in the first 14 verses of Ephesians and 'in Christ' and 'in him' appears 36 times throughout Ephesians. We are told in verse 3 that we are blessed with **'every spiritual blessing in Christ'**.

Carefully list all the blessings in these verses.

Is there any one spiritual blessing which impresses you more than the rest?

What is the effect on you when you consider all these blessings together?

3. As you reflect on these blessings, what contributions do you see of each person of the Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?
4. How do these blessings relate to the past [v4], the present [v7] and the future [v10]
5. **'For he chose us in him'** [v4].

God put us and Christ together in his mind. He determined to make us [who did not yet exist] his own children through the redeeming work of Christ [which had not yet taken place]. It was a definite decision and arose from his entirely unmerited favour. When he chose us, we were unholy and blameworthy, and therefore deserving not of adoption but of judgement.

How are you affected by the fact that God had a plan for you before the world was created?

6. What is the purpose of God for the future? What do you think it will mean to have all things under the head of Christ? [v10]
7. Notice the repeated phrase, 'to the praise of his glory' in verses 5-6, 12 and 14.

What does this tell you about why God created us?

What does it mean to live 'to the praise of his glory'?

Apply

How will your life change if you live to the praise of his glory knowing your new identity in Christ? Consider one or two practical examples.

Pray

Reflect on all that we have in Christ Jesus and our new identity in him. Praise God for each and all of the spiritual blessings he has given to you, past, present and future. Ask the Holy Spirit to make them a reality in your life.

STUDY TWO | I am saved

Getting started

If you had to use a maximum of three words to describe yourself before you were a Christian what would they be?

Read Ephesians 2:1-10

1. **In the opening verses**, Paul describes the state of a person before they 'become a Christian'. What sort of image does Paul portray in the first three verses? Why does he describe people in this way?

Having considered Paul's description, what are the implications that extend from this? What can people do for themselves?

2. Looking more closely at v.2, how does Paul describe the way people live?
3. Who is '**the ruler of the kingdom of the air**' [v.2], and how is this ruler involved in the people's way of living?
4. In v.3 Paul describes **the way ALL lived**, what might it look like to '*gratify the cravings of our sinful nature?*' Would this be a fair description of our world today?

Paul states that by nature, due to this description of living, **'we were objects of wrath.'** Is this a fair result for such living? Why/why not?

5. Ephesians 2.4-5 are some of the most well-known verses in the Scriptures. The gospel in microcosm. How does what is described in v.3 add weight to what we read in v.4-5? When we were dead, what did God do?
6. In v.5-6 there are three actions that describe God's saving activity, what are they? Explain each of these actions.

Can you use a word to describe all of these actions and what God has done? Is there something adequate to capture it? Does 'saved' or 'rescued' capture it well enough? Why/why not?

7. Having considered God's action, what appears to be the purpose behind His saving activity [v.7], His means [v.8] and where it originates from, including what part people play [v.8]? Ultimately, **how is it that people are saved?**

Apply

The final three verses of this section [v.9-11] all build upon one another and what has come before; they help us to apply the passage more specifically. Grace is mentioned numerous times in the letter of Ephesians, we see the letter start and finish with *'grace and peace'* [1.3; 6.23-24]. Considering these final few verses within the context of the letter:

1. How has your understanding of *grace* deepened from what you have read so far in Ephesians?
2. What is the place of good works in relation to salvation? [v.10]
3. What kinds of 'boasting' can Christians often fall into?

Unbelievably we can often boast in the good works that are already prepared for us [2.10] and even in the gratifications of our sinful desires – boast in who we once were, or with non-Christians, boast in acts that create us to be objects of wrath ruled by the spirit of the air.

4. What should change when we consider what we once were, those who, **walked in the way of the world and following the ruler of the air, the spirit who is at work in those who are disobedient** [v.2], to what we are now, **being made alive and raised with Christ in the heavenly realms** [v.6]?

We started by using three words to describe ourselves before we were in Christ, does anyone have a suggestion of three words we could use as Christians to describe this relationship that saves us?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Pray

Spend some time thanking God for what is described in v.4-5. Ask that each of you would understand that being *in* Christ also means to be alive, raised and seated *with* Christ. Pray for those who still by nature objects of wrath, ask God that He might make them alive and so save them.

STUDY THREE | I am afflicted and a witness

If we are in Christ, we should expect to suffer like Christ and for Christ. We worship a God who came to the earth and was afflicted. And throughout the Scriptures and the history of the church, those who have served him most faithfully have been afflicted most painfully. Paul was one such man. Before his new identity in Christ, he persecuted the church. Once born again in Christ, Paul went from afflicting Christians to being afflicted as a Christian, even writing some of his New Testament letters, such as Ephesians while in prison. [2 Corinthians 11:23-33 gives a summary of Paul's afflictions]

Getting started

Paul was afflicted because of the gospel work he was called to. Share briefly an example of personal affliction and suffering because of the gospel. [At home, work, school, university etc.]

Read Ephesians 3:1-11

1. In verse 1 Paul calls himself **'the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles'**. Humanly speaking Paul was Nero's prisoner and was under house arrest awaiting trial.

Why does he call himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus? What does this say about his perspective on suffering and God's sovereignty?

Why does he say **'for the sake of you Gentiles'**? How did his mission to the Gentiles lead to affliction [Acts 21:17ff; 22:21ff]

In the second half of Ephesians 2, Paul showed how Christ demolished the Jew-Gentile and God-man barriers and was now creating a single, new multicultural human society, the church.

It seems likely that the apostle was about to pray for the Ephesians when he interrupted himself and did not begin his prayer until v14.

In verses 2 to 13, he elaborated his self-description in order to emphasize the unique privileges God had given him in the outworking of his purpose for the Gentiles.

He concludes with v 14 again talking about suffering.

'I ask you therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory'.

The message Paul was privileged to share was so powerful and amazing that he counted it an honour to suffer for it.

3. In verses 2-6, we read about a **divine revelation** given to Paul concerning a **'mystery'**. Explain the meaning of the mystery revealed to Paul.

4. In verses 7-13 we read about Paul's **divine commission**, the ministry entrusted to him. Describe this ministry.

5. Who are the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms [v10]? [See also 6:12]

6. What purpose does God have for his church [v10-11]

7. In what sense are Paul's sufferings the glory of the Ephesians [v13]? [See also Col.1: 27; 3: 4; 2 Thess.2: 14; 2 Cor.4: 17; Rom.8: 17,18]
8. What are the ways in which Paul describes himself in these verses? What does it say about his self-understanding?

These verses show that Paul is totally captivated by the greatness of Jesus Christ and the immense importance of the gospel. Paul doesn't describe himself in terms of his own talent or family background. He doesn't get his identity or significance from income or academic record. Paul thinks of himself in terms of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ and the gospel dominate his thinking and self-expression.

Apply

How would adopting Paul's attitude and perspective affect how we view and handle afflictions?

Prayer

Pray that you would be faithful to God despite afflictions and that understanding your identity in Christ would compel you to move in ministry and mission to the glory of God.

STUDY FOUR | I am heard

'People who know their God are before anything else a people who pray, and the first point where their zeal and energy for God's glory come to expression is in their prayers.'

J.I. Packer - Knowing God (p.29)

Getting started

Why would Packer suggest prayer as the 'first point' of expression for 'people who know their God'? Does this quote capture how you function as a 'knower of God'? Why is it that so many people find prayer difficult?

In today's study, we will consider what it is that causes Paul to kneel before his Father in prayer and more particularly how our identity in Christ is a key aspect to our prayer life. This then will help us consider the specifics of our prayers and then respond together.

In order to best capture this moment in the letter, trace back through the text and search for all the times Paul uses the phrases 'for this reason,' or 'therefore' or similar phrases in different translations. What impression does this give you for the way Paul has written this letter, what is the movement?

Read Ephesians 3:14-21

1. Having traced the movement of the letter and after reading Ephesians 3:14-21, what do you think the climax of the letter is? Have we reached it or is it yet to come?
2. In v.14 Paul uses the phrase 'for this reason,' this directs us back and explains the following phrase. For what reason does Paul kneel before the Father?

3. Paul draw's attention to where 'every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.' Where do they derive their name from and what is the significance of this reality?

How might 1 Sam 25:25 help explain this? See leaders notes.

4. Having given his reason for addressing the Father and the one to whom he addresses, in v.16-19 Paul details the content of his prayer. In your own words give an overview of the flow in content.

Again, generally speaking, do any of these prayers echo earlier parts of Ephesians? Find the specific places in the letter you are referring to.

Are all the persons of the God-head (the Trinity) mentioned in Paul's prayer?

5. More specifically what is the purpose of v.16 and how is this different to what we have seen earlier in Ephesians?
6. Why might Paul pray that the people, '**may have the power to grasp**' (v.18), would they not already have this power? Do you find this a strange way to phrase this request? Explain why/why not.
7. If v.19 isn't contradicting itself, what does this tell us about Paul's understanding of God's love? How might this verse and the previous be read in parallel?

8. When we read v.18-19 together, what is the 'big idea,' the main point or a simple way to pull their meaning together?

Read 1.23 and 3.19, Is there another contradiction here? If not, what then Paul mean by the phrase '**filled to the measure of all the fullness of God?**' [v.19]

This has implications for the following passages as this is what Paul will go on to talk about and work through with the Ephesians, 'be who you are' is a major theme, 'be all that God wants you to be.' In the following chapters, Paul gets very practical with this very concept. Our identity in Christ is to fuel and fill every aspect of our life.

Apply and Pray

During prayer at different points, we are going to stand but also kneel like Paul did – it was normal for people to stand in Jewish custom but not uncommon for them to kneel, and it showed or signified an even greater reverence and submission, particularly demonstrating a humble approach to God. Your Home Group leader will have different areas set up for you to pray in, or have times where you go through the ACTS Prayer Model as detailed below:

A-doration - STAND

C-onfession - KNEEL

T-hanksgiving – STAND [arms up]

S-upplication – KNEEL [hands out]

This can be uncomfortable, but physical expression is another way for us to better embody praise and worship. When used well, it contributes to our ability to approach our Father as Paul did in prayer.

This week, spend one day on each area of this ACTS Prayer model and also pray for our church as Paul prayed for the Ephesian church.

STUDY FIVE | I am gifted

In Christ, we have been given a new identity and a new community. We learn more about our new identity as we use our gifts to serve and are served by the gifts of others. Sometimes Christians shy away from involvement in the local church because they don't think they are gifted. The reality is that we are all gifted by God [1 Cor.12:7] and we all need to serve for the common good and the unity of the body of Christ.

Getting started

When and how have you used your gifts for the good of the church? What brings you the most joy in serving?

Read Ephesians 4:1-6

1. While Ephesians 1-3 provides a doctrinal foundation, Ephesians 4-6 shows in practical detail how to live for the glory of God in the church. In 4: 1 Paul urges them to lead a life worthy of their calling. According to chapters 1-3 what is the calling to which they have been called?
2. What are the characteristics of a life that is worthy of our calling [vv. 1-3]?
3. When is it hard to be humble and gentle? What might be involved in 'bearing with one another in love'?
4. We are commanded to keep the unity of the Spirit [v3]. But Paul also says we are already have one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God and Father of all [v4-6]. If we are already one, then why must Paul also command us to be one?

How do these seven 'ones' contribute to actually living out true unity?

Read Ephesians 4:7-16

5. In verses 8-10, Christ is compared to a conquering hero who triumphal procession fills the 'whole universe', from the highest heaven to the lowest earth. He then generously distributes gifts to his loyal followers. What is the nature and purpose of these gifts [v11-13]?

6. In 1 Cor.12:7-10; 28-30; Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Pet. 4:10-11 further lists of spiritual gifts are given.

What spiritual gifts do you think you might have? How are you using them for the good of the church? How might you use them in the future? What might hold you back?

7. Who are to do the 'works of service' [v12]? Is this the way we usually think about church?

8. What is the end result of each person using their gifts and doing 'works of service' [v12-13]?

9. 'Just like an orchestra only reaches a rich harmony through a range of different instruments, a Christian group can only find a rich unity through all its members contributing in their own different ways.' [Walk this Way, Ephesians, p40]

How have you seen this truth demonstrated in a ministry you are involved in?

10. What are signs and evidences that a church is growing to maturity [v14-16]?

11. In verse 16 Paul says that the body 'grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.' What steps do you need to take to more fully work toward this goal?

Pray

Pray for each other as you seek unity and maturity in the church. Pray also for the various ministries where you are using your spiritual gifts for the common good.

STUDY SIX | I am new

C.S. Lewis describes 'the new man' in his book *Mere Christianity*, describing the relationship between Christ and us:

'The more we get what we now call "ourselves" out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become. There is so much of Him that millions and millions of "little Christs," all different, will still be too few to express Him fully. He made them all. He invented – as an author invents character in a novel – all the different men that you and I were intended to be. In that sense our real selves are all waiting for us in Him. It is no good trying to "be myself" without Him... It is when I turn to Christ, when I give myself up to His Personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own.'

C.S. Lewis *Mere Christianity, Book IV, Chapter 11*

Getting started

Discuss:

What was the last new thing you received? What did you like about it? Was it 'replacing' something old? If you did get something new, why would you return to the old thing? What might mean you desire the old again?

Read Ephesians 4:17-24

Skim Ephesians 4:1-16

1. Having looked at the whole of chapter 4, which verse has given us the general instruction Paul wants all Christians to know and hear? How is this general instruction related to our identity?
2. Paul has just spent the last few chapters of the letter convincing the people they are one, both Jew and Gentile. Why would Paul use the word Gentile in a negative fashion in v.17? Does this undermine his argument, or, is he making a different point? Explain.

3. With what we have learnt from Ephesians and by looking again at the passages below, why would living like the Gentiles be inappropriate for Christians?

I. Ephesians 2.1-3

II. Ephesians 2.11-12

Activity

In verses 17-19 Paul gives a vivid description of the Gentile who is apart from Christ. Move through the description and try and put these things in your own words or in 'common' language.

Each person can attempt to rewrite the phrases and then share with the group/person next to them. Alternatively, attempt to draw them. This is more difficult but can also make the description more vivid.

- Futility of their thinking
- Darkened in their understanding
- Separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts
- Lost all sensitivity
- Given themselves over to sensuality
- To indulge in every kind of impurity
- A continual lust for more

4. Having just done that exercise what impact do v.17-19 have upon you? Would your own thoughts and estimation of life before Christ match up? What did life look like before Christ and is there a difference now?

5. What does our culture tell us about our condition as humans? Do you think we are an optimistic or pessimistic culture?

6. With what you have discussed in mind, could we maintain that we are essentially good? Is there any room to suggest that we could excuse sinful behaviour because of peoples sinful condition?
7. In v.20-24 Paul contrasts the Christian life, '**you, however, did not...**' with the life of the Gentile. What is different about the Christian life? Generally speaking:
- I. what have they learned? [v.20-21]
 - II. what were they taught? [v.21-24]

Paul suggests they were taught something specific [v.22-24], what was it? Why do you think Paul directs this to being made new in the '**attitude of your minds?**' [v.23] Ultimately, who are they to be like and why?

8. Verse 24 explains what the new self is *created* to be like, what emphasis does this phrasing give? What do you think Paul is referring to when he says '**true righteousness and holiness?**'

Apply

This is a big call, but it is the call of a Christian, ***to live a life worthy of the calling.*** The new life you have put on. As we thought about new things earlier, now in regard to ourselves:

- why is it tempting to return to the old self?
- why is it hard to put it off?

Does our culture or the world around us have anything to say about our 'old' and 'new selves'? What sort of things does it portray?

What was it that the passage said leads us to take off the old and put on the new, why could that be something that helps?

Pray

Ask God that he might continue to help you put off your old self, which is being corrupted by deceitful desires and be made new in the attitude of your minds. Pray for one another, that we might all get what *we* call ourselves out of the way, and instead live as we were intended to, that is, 'created to be like God'.

Additional for this week

Our passage doesn't really tell us what the new self is in detail, unlike the old. Paul *will* explain it further. He goes on to tell us exactly what to put on and it might be helpful this week to read Ephesians 6.13-17 if you feel the pull of the old and the deceitfulness of this age. He also continues more practically in the proceeding verses. In order to live NEW, the following might be helpful:

This week **read Ephesians 4.25-5.20**. A great deal of practical stuff flows from the fact that we are NEW, and are now 'children of the light' and so we walk in the light.

Each day read one of the following sections. Identify the practical outworking of being new in Christ and seek to remain faithful in that area of your walk.

- ✓ Ephesians 4.25-28
- ✓ Ephesians 4.29-32
- ✓ Ephesians 5.1-5
- ✓ Ephesians 5.6-16
- ✓ Ephesians 5.17-20

STUDY SEVEN | I am victorious

We live in a war zone. There is an enemy, the devil, who hates God and hates you. He has set his army against you because you're 'in Christ'. The good news is that God loves you and he poured out his wrath on Jesus, who secured our victory over Satan, sin and death for us on the cross. When life gets hard, we can easily forget that we are victorious in Christ and lose hope. So in this final section of Ephesians Paul reminds the believers of the spiritual battle and the weapons they have in Christ to overcome the evil one.

Getting started

C.S. Lewis said, 'There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.' If you were to fall into one of these errors which one would it be and why?

Read Ephesians 6:10-12

1. Why do you think the powers of darkness want to wage war on us? [Eph.3:10; Col.2:13-15]
2. What are some of the 'devil's schemes'?
3. What do we have to do to protect ourselves from the evil forces [v10-11]?

Read Ephesians 6:13-17

4. List out all the different pieces of the armour of God to be used in the battle.

5. How does each piece prepare us for the spiritual battle?

6. The armour is something that God provides. It is not so much something we do to defeat the devil but something God has done for us through Christ. We simply have to avail ourselves to it. The armour of God is a picture of the gospel. How does this truth give you courage in the battle?

Read Ephesians 6:18-20

7. Prayer is an important weapon in the spiritual battle. What does it mean to pray 'in the Spirit'? How does verse 17 help us understand this phrase? [see also 5:18 'be filled with the Spirit']

8. Why does Paul encourage his readers to be alert in verse 18? What does he want them to be alert about?

9. What specific things does Paul request prayer for? What does this say about Paul's passion in life and ministry and where the enabling comes from?

10. What main obstacle do you face in fighting the battle of prayer more effectively?

Pray

Take time now to pray about your fight in the spiritual battle thanking God for Christ's victory over the devil and the full armour of God that will help us stand.