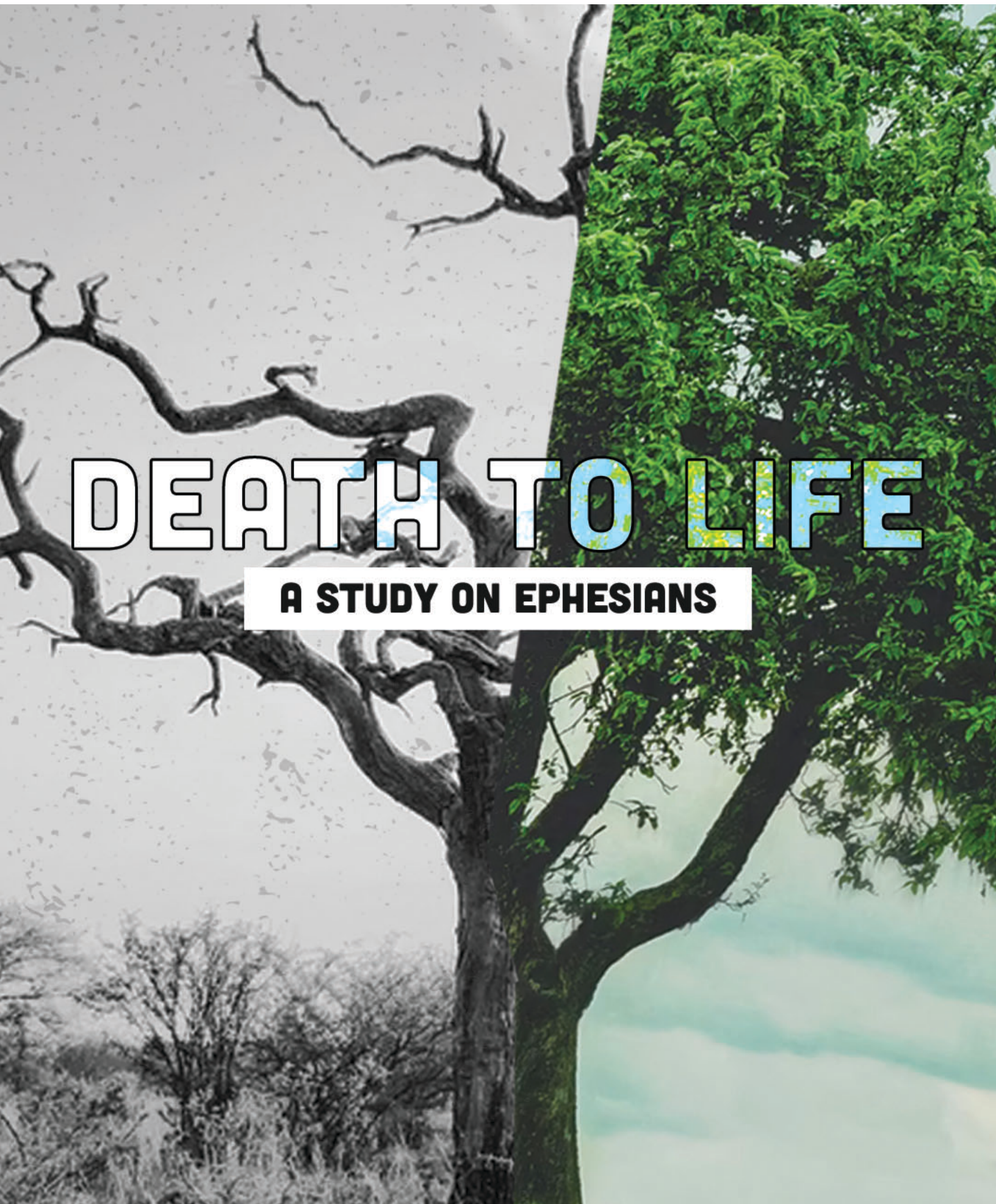


# SMALL GROUP GUIDE

# DEATH TO LIFE

**A STUDY ON EPHESIANS**



## CIRCLE 01/03: **JESUS BLESSES US**

“There’s an app for that.” This tagline dominated the world during the launch of the iPhone. While this is common knowledge now, it took a lot of clever marketing to convince people that phones could be used for more than calls. Thus, Apple spent a fortune advertising the app store. Do you want to see the constellations? There’s an app for that. Do you want to watch dog videos nonstop? There’s an app for that. Do you want to make a phone call? We think there’s an app for that.

If ancient Greece were to come up with an advertising slogan, it would likely be “there’s a god for that.” Greek culture believed that dozens of gods and goddesses manipulated every part of their daily lives. Zeus was the god of lightning and rain. Thus, they would make sacrifices when their crops needed water. Neptune was the god of the sea. If you wanted your sailor to come home safely, you would turn to him. Aphrodite was the goddess of love. If you wanted someone to like you, you would ask her to convince her son, Cupid, to shoot them with a love dart.

There is a book in the Bible called Ephesians. It’s a letter written by the apostle Paul to the Greeks living in a thriving city called Ephesus. They were as Greek as Greek could be. They celebrated Greek philosophers, loved the Olympics, and ate a lot of feta cheese. More importantly, Ephesus was one of the religious capitals of the ancient world. Thus, they were well acquainted with mysterious gods and goddesses.

The Ephesians didn’t just love the gods; they memorialized them on every corner in Ephesus. This city was home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world — the temple of Artemis. This building was an architectural marvel with huge columns, lavish design, and world-famous symbolism.

As far as the Greeks were concerned, Artemis was the god who reigned supreme. However, Paul introduced the people to a God whose glory wasn't found in a physical building, but in the spiritual realms. Their gods blessed them with crops, fish, and rain, but the true God blesses us with eternity. The Greek gods give physical blessings, but Jesus gives spiritual blessings.

Paul wanted the whole world to know the glory of God and the greatness of Jesus. That's why he spent his entire Christian life dedicated to traveling the known world to

tell people about Jesus. When Paul visited Ephesus on his second mission trip (Acts 18), he witnessed both breakthrough and backlash. During his tour, he worked miracles and saw hundreds of people saved. There was a tipping point during his journey though.

The gospel led many Ephesians to reject Artemis and begin worshiping Jesus. Some of the people who accepted Jesus as their savior got carried away and burned some very expensive and sacred scrolls. As more and more people rejected Artemis, a riot broke out and Paul was nearly killed (Acts 19:11-41).

Paul, certainly reflecting on this near-death experience, carefully penned his letter to the Ephesians to explore one central topic — the life-changing power of Jesus. Yes, that's powerful, but it's also very practical. He wanted his audience to know that Jesus was the one true God and that he reigned supreme. But he didn't leave it there. He also examined how that truth would change their lives. Let's explore the opening paragraph of Ephesians that celebrates the goodness of God.

**READ: Ephesians 1:3-10**

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

Can't you just feel the joy in Paul's voice? Fun fact: this section of scripture is the longest sentence in the whole New Testament. It's just phrase after phrase of pure excitement about all that God has given us. He's so excited that he didn't even have time for punctuation.

This theology-packed run-on sentence can be summed up like this: "Praise God because we are blessed beyond belief." Let's break down three blessings from Christ that have the power to change our lives.

### **One: We Are Blessed "In the Heavenly Realms"**

The Greek word for "blessing" is "*eulogia*," which directly translates to "benefit." Our spiritual blessings aren't just perks; they are life-altering realities that come through our connection to Christ.

Paul opens his letter with a zinger. God doesn't just give us benefits, he gives us supernatural blessings. Jesus blesses us with "every spiritual blessing." This is an important comparison to the traditional belief structures in ancient Greece. Greeks prayed to gods who would provide for them materially. Paul encourages his readers to rethink their entire religion by turning to a God who blesses us more spiritually than materially.

We fall victim to Ephesian-like thinking all the time. We ask God to bless us with a nice house, a fancy car, or a big bank account. All of those things are good, but they're not the best that God has to offer. Our savior blesses us spiritually. A car is good, but freedom is better. A house is good, but peace is better. Wealth is good, but eternal life is better.

Think like Paul. Thank God for your invisible, intangible, and spiritual blessings. There is more than you can even comprehend.

Praise God because we are blessed beyond belief.

### **Two: We Are Blessed with Adoption**

Have you ever met a family who went through adoption? It's a beautiful thing. In an instant, the child's life is changed forever. They have a new family, a good home, and long-term protection. It's so much bigger than a new last name; it's a new identity. They have been accepted into a loving family.

Paul parallels our identity to that of an adopted child. God adopted you into His spiritual family. Jesus picked you up, gave you a new identity, and accepted you into a

loving home called the Church. In ancient Ephesus, people were allowed to disown their children up to one year after their birth with no consequences. However, if a family adopted a child, they were legally forbidden from rejecting them. Their future was secured with a signature on the adoption paperwork. No clauses. No exceptions. No turning back.

The same is true for you. Jesus selected you for adoption. This means that He will never reject you, disown you, or let you go. God won't kick you out. Jesus won't send you packing. You will belong for good. This is a forever family. Our faith isn't just about beliefs; it's about belonging. You belong to the eternal family of God.

Praise God because we are blessed beyond belief.

### **Three: We Are Blessed with Grace and Forgiveness**

The word in verse seven for "grace" means "unmerited favor." You didn't earn it and you don't deserve it, but you still get to experience it. Isn't there something special about being in a family built on the foundation of forgiveness?

God doesn't just give us grace; he "lavishes it on us." God dishes it out freely and there is always more to go around. When you make a mistake, God forgives. When you make a wrong turn, God redirects. When you feel like a failure, God's mercy will help you carry on. You are forever safe in God's grace. It's a spiritual blessing that knows no end.

God's blessings are as vast as the ocean and we are just standing on the shore. Sure, we can see some of them, but we are hardly scratching the surface. God has blessed us beyond belief. Praise Jesus for that. Just when you struggle to count your blessings, remember that God's blessings are invaluable, invisible, spiritual, supernatural, and eternal.

Paul's message to the Ephesians is the same message he wants us to receive today: **Praise God because we are blessed beyond belief.** Our blessings aren't necessarily physical, rather they are spiritual. You have been blessed with adoption, forgiveness, and an eternity with Jesus. No material blessing can even come close. God blesses us, so we should praise Him.

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: The ancient Greeks worshiped greek gods in pursuit of physical blessings like rain, crops and wealth. What physical blessings do your peers usually pursue?

Q2: How is a physical blessing different from a spiritual blessing?

Q3: Which spiritual blessing from Jesus resonated with you the most? (We are blessed "in the heavenly realms," We are blessed with adoption, or We are blessed with with grace and forgiveness). Why?

Q4: How can we praise God for spiritual blessings even when we are lacking material blessings?

Application: Pray to God every day this week thanking him for one spiritual blessing that you have received.

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

Isaiah 49:14-16

John 20:24-29

Romans 8:26-30

Psalms 103

1 Corinthians 2:9

John 13:34

1 Corinthians 13:1

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present.

Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

## CIRCLE 02/03: **JESUS SAVES US**

Have you ever heard of zombie animals? While humans only thrive with their full nervous systems intact, some animals aren't so picky. Snakes have been known to bite their predators even after having their heads cut off. Frogs can hop around for nearly a full day without their brains. Chicken bodies have been known to run, jump, and even chase their captors after their deaths. It's both fascinating and unsettling.

While continuing his letter to the Ephesians, Paul shares some harsh language in chapter two. His surprising words carries strong zombie vibes — not literally, but metaphorically. Without Jesus, we aren't just directionless and purposeless, we are spiritually dead. Sure, our bodies can move like a brainless frog, but it's all just an illusion. We are only faking it because we are lifeless without Jesus.

Paul wanted to help his Greek audience grasp the true distinction between God and the Greek gods worshiped in Ephesus. Their gods were believed to help crops grow, but our God has the power to bring people back to life. Yes, this is a serious distinction.

The prognosis or spiritual death is grim, but the remedy from God is glorious. Let's dissect our spiritual diagnosis in Ephesians 2.

### **READ: Ephesians 2:1-3**

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

Just like a doctor discussing promising treatments after a bombshell diagnosis, Paul uses the same method to discuss our spiritual struggle. "I have bad news and good news," says the Apostle Paul to his Ephesian friends. "Let me give you the bad news first."

## **The Bad News: Without Jesus, You Are Spiritually Dead**

Paul begins this section with a description of their spiritual condition without Jesus. It's critical. Before accepting Jesus as their Savior, the Ephesians were dead in their sins. Their default setting is rebellion against God. Paul didn't hold back in his evaluation because He knew the cure was far more powerful than the diagnosis.

Paul identifies three symptoms of spiritual sickness.

- First, they follow "the ways of the world" (Ephesians 2:2a). These are cultural beliefs that don't align with truths from God. In the city of Ephesus, Greeks were taught to deny Jesus and worship idol gods. While today's "ways of the world" probably aren't tempting you to worship ancient gods and goddesses, our culture has plenty of idols too. Greed, lust, selfishness, prejudice, idolatry, and laziness are all cultural currents that pull us further from God. Resist them. God's ways are far better than our cultural trends. If it's outside of God's purpose, then it's pulling you away from God's promise.
- Second, "the ruler of the kingdom of air" controlled their lives (Ephesians 2:2b). Who is the prince of the air? This is the enemy, the adversary, or the devil. While he goes by many names, one thing is certain. The enemy wants nothing more than to trick people into thinking they're fully alive without Jesus. The devil lies to you, tricks you, and manipulates you into thinking you can thrive on your own. The opposite is true because a fulfilled life is lived with Jesus.
- Lastly, "our flesh" resists the things of God (Ephesians 2:3). Biblically speaking, our flesh represents our natural instincts without spiritual intervention. These are our human and sinful desires that lead us in the opposite direction of God's plans for us.

That's the bad news. Without a life-giving relationship with Jesus, we are dead people walking. Sure, we may move, breathe, and eat, but our hearts are in a spiritual casket. However, there is good news coming, and it's the best news you'll ever hear. Verses 1-3 are pretty dark, but they are illuminated by the universe-shifting promises in verses 4-6.



**READ: Ephesians 2:4-6**

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

**The Good News: Jesus Brings Us Back to Life**

"But" is one of the most powerful words in this entire passage. It's a small word with a big meaning. Why? It represents a shift in the tone of this passage. Even more significant, it represents the cosmic shift that takes place when God steps into our lives. What's the driving force behind Paul's change of tone? It's the love and mercy of God.

Jesus, rich in love, didn't just take us from good to bad. Jesus supernaturally took us from death to life. He raised you from the dead. God interrupted your funeral service, put breath back in your lungs, dusted you off, and picked you up out of the casket. We were spiritually dead but now we are eternally alive. How awe-inspiring is that?

God loves you. He wants you to live a full life and spend eternity with Him. Thus, Jesus stepped in, defeated death, and saved us. This is so much more than good news. This is the gospel. This is the kind of news we want to shout from the rooftops, share with everyone we know, and reflect on every single day. As we often say, salvation is cause for celebration.

That is all great news! We were sick, but we can be cured. Yes, the reality of our spiritual lifelessness is a difficult pill to swallow, but it's helpful in the end. Paul was a good leader and good leaders don't shy away from the truth — even when it's hard. So, let's follow suit and do the same thing.

Paul wants us all to make a significant decision — how do we respond to the life-changing power of Jesus? It's a question we all need to answer because it changes everything for us. Let's say you're in near-perfect health. You will spend 80, 90, or maybe 100 years here on this earth. While that feels like a long time, it's only a raindrop in the ocean of eternity. You will spend billions upon trillions of years in eternity. God wants to ensure you join Him.

## **Our Response: The First Day of Forever**

God doesn't just bring us back to life, He gives us eternal life. Just imagine the glorious gift of eternity. It's so much richer than floating on clouds with golden harps. It's the state of perfect union with God and God's perfect design for you. You will never be sad; you will be reunited with your loved ones; you'll never get tired; you'll receive rewards; and you'll love every second of it.

Eternity is going to be amazing. I want you to join me there. When you turn to Jesus, that supernatural event becomes the first day of forever for you.

In Romans 10:9, Paul said, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." It's not complicated to experience salvation. All you need to do is confess and trust. That's the process. There is no ten-step program. There is no magical saying. All you need to do is confess to Jesus through prayer and trust in Him.

There is nothing special about any particular prayer of confession. It's all about the heart behind the words. If you don't know what to pray, it can sound a little like this: "Jesus, I admit that I've made mistakes. I've sinned and need your forgiveness. I believe that You came to Earth, died, and rose again so that I could be reunited with God. I declare you as my Lord and commit my life to You. I give you my past, present, and future. Please use my life to bring you glory. I give it to You. Amen."

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What does the word "salvation" really mean?

Q2: Paul says that without Jesus you were "dead in your transgressions." Why do you think he uses that phrase?

Q3: What do you think it means to be made "alive in Christ?"

Q4: What should our response be to the good news laid out in Ephesians 2:4-6?

Application: Pray and thank God for the miracle of salvation. Every day this week, ask God to make you more aware of the great gift that He has given you.

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

Mark 5:1-20

Psalms 22:19-31

1 John 1:2-3

1 Timothy 6:7

2 Peter 3:17

Romans 5:3-4

Hebrews 12:1

Do the following with each passage:

ASK— God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present.

Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ— the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT— on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND— to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

## CIRCLE 03/03: **JESUS TRANSFORMS US**

Imagination is a powerful thing. Harnessing the power of pretend, children create fake friends, business leaders revolutionize their industries, and comic books come to life on a big screen.

It breaks my heart, but people tend to lose touch with their imagination as they grow up. They think of daydreaming and playing pretend as childish hobbies. That's not true. Imagination is at the center of success. When you look at some of the fastest-growing companies in the world today, imagination drives them. Apple reimagined phones and now everyone has a touchscreen device. Disney created new worlds out of thin air and now they're one of the most profitable businesses on earth. Netflix reimagined how we consume media and now streaming is more popular than satellite.

Harnessing our imagination, we can access new possibilities, enrich the world, dream about our futures, walk into new experiences, and tell stories that shape people's lives. Imagination invites us to see the world with childlike wonder — believing the best in people, letting curiosity lead the way, and taking the sting out of failure.

If you want to succeed, you need to dream. That's why I love the passage in the middle of Ephesians.

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to his Christian family in a Greco-Roman city that loved the arts, theater, and the power of the mind. Ephesian citizens who followed famous Greek teachers saw their imagination as something to be celebrated, but Paul wanted them to know that God had something even better in store. Our God both exalts imagination and wants to expand it.

When Jesus comes into our lives, he transforms us. He doesn't just change our eternal address either. It's so much bigger than that. God changes your heart, your mind, and your imagination. After meeting Jesus, your dreams become more vivid and your goals become more audacious. Why? Because walking with God allows us to take our imagination to the next level.

**READ: Ephesians 3:17-21**

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

This section of scripture records one of Paul's most famous prayers. Unlike most of his letters, this prayer takes place right in the middle of the book. Paul interrupts his teaching to worship God and dream about all God wants to do in the lives of His people. According to these verses, God doesn't just want us to have a good life. He wants us to experience a great life full of wonder and adventure.

While studying this letter to ancient Greeks, Paul gives us two truths that transform our thinking. When you begin to grasp all God wants for you, everything changes.

**One: Grasp God's Love for You**

Paul makes the purpose of his prayer pretty clear. He wants them to, "grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." Why? Because "to know this love that surpasses knowledge" (3:17). You read that right. Knowledge of God's love is better than all the knowledge in existence.

Have you ever heard of the Library of Congress? It's the biggest library in the world. Think of it like a real-life Wikipedia. The Library of Congress boasts over 175 million items in its colossal collection. They've collected children's books, history books, zoological journals, and even Thomas Jefferson's recipe for vanilla ice cream. If you were to look at every single thought in every single volume, none of them would come close to what Paul just said. Compared to all the truth in the world, God's love for you is the most important.

Why? Because God's love changes lives. Once you understand that God loves you and wants the best for you, everything changes. Just try to wrap your head around it.

There is a God who supports you, adores you, protects you, and defends you. Shouldn't that change how you live?

You can take bigger faith leaps because you know God will catch you. You can dream bigger dreams because you know the Spirit will empower you. You can go farther because God is leading you. When you grasp God's love, your entire worldview changes. When you know how much God adores you, your goals begin to shift into God-sized goals.

### **Two: Let God Stretch Your Imagination**

I don't know about you, but I spend a lot of time dreaming. I consistently daydream about new projects, new experiences, new places, and new opportunities. It's a pretty big part of my day. While I used to be embarrassed by this, I have discovered that it's perfectly normal to play pretend throughout the day. As a matter of fact, it's how God wired me. It's how He wired you too.

Here is the mind-blowing truth behind this passage. Our dreams are dwarfed by God's dreams for us. According to Paul, God is "able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (3:20). How astounding is that? Your dreams are small compared to God's plans for you. Think of your biggest dream for your life. Now multiply it by a thousand because God wants to do immeasurably more.

What do you want to see in your life? Do you have a dream? Dream with God. Do you have a passion? Let God's love energize it. Do you have a big goal? Ask God to empower you. God doesn't want you to live an average life. Quite the opposite, He wants you to live life to the fullest. A full life unfolds when we grasp His love and let God stretch our imagination. Let God bring transformation to your imagination.

The message Paul delivered to the ancient city of Ephesus remains just as powerful today. Let that message change you too. Jesus blesses you, saves you, and wants to transform you.

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: Why do you think it was so important to Paul that people understand how much God loves them?

Q2: How can grasping God's love transform the way Christians act and think?

Q3: What are "God-sized" dreams?

Q4: How does God empower us to do more than we are capable of accomplishing on our own?

Application: What's one dream that you think God has placed in your heart? How can you lean into God's love and glorify Him as you pursue that dream?

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

1 Thessalonians 5:18

Matthew 28:18-20

1 Timothy 2:1-6

Philippians 3:4-17

John 9:13-34

1 John 5:1-12

1 John 5: 12-21

Do the following with each passage:

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Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

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RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.