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LifeChange
SERIES

A NavPress Bible study on the book of
EPHESIANS

NAVPRESS 

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ISBN 08910-90541

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Printed in the United States of America

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 / 00 99 98

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The LIFECHANGE series has been produced through the coordinated efforts of a team of Navigator Bible study developers and NavPress editorial staff, along with a nationwide network of fieldtesters.

SERIES EDITOR: KAREN LEE-THORP

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Objectives

Each guide in the LIFECHANGE series of Bible studies covers one book of the Bible. Although the LIFECHANGE guides vary with the individual books they explore, they share some common goals:

1. To provide you with a firm foundation of understanding and a thirst to return to the book;
2. To teach you by example how to study a book of the Bible without structured guides;
3. To give you all the historical background, word definitions, and explanatory notes you need, so that your only other reference is the Bible;
4. To help you grasp the message of the book as a whole;
5. To teach you how to let God's Word transform you into Christ's image.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take 60 to 90 minutes to complete on your own. The guide is based on the assumption that you are completing one lesson per week, but if time is limited you can do half a lesson per week or whatever amount allows you to be thorough.

Flexibility

LIFECHANGE guides are flexible, allowing you to adjust the quantity and depth of your study to meet your individual needs. The guide offers many optional questions in addition to the regular numbered questions. The optional questions, which appear in the margins of the study pages, include the following:

Optional Application. Nearly all application questions are optional; we hope you will do as many as you can without overcommitting yourself.

For Thought and Discussion. Beginning Bible students should be able to handle these, but even advanced students need to think about them. These questions frequently deal with ethical issues and other biblical principles. They often offer cross-references to spark thought, but the references do not give

obvious answers. They are good for group discussions.

For Further Study. These include: a) cross-references that shed light on a topic the book discusses, and b) questions that delve deeper into the passage. You can omit them to shorten a lesson without missing a major point of the passage.

(Note: At the end of lessons three through thirteen you are given the option of outlining the passage just studied. Although the outline is optional, you will almost surely find it worthwhile.)

If you are meeting in a group, decide together which optional questions to prepare for each lesson, and how much of the lesson you will cover at the next meeting. Normally, the group leader should make this decision, but you might let each member choose his own application questions.

As you grow in your walk with God, you will find the *LIFECHANGE* guide growing with you—a helpful reference on a topic, a continuing challenge for application, a source of questions for many levels of growth.

Overview and Details

The guide begins with an overview of the book. The key to interpretation is context—what is the whole passage or book *about*?—and the key to context is purpose—what is the author’s *aim* for the whole work? In lesson one you will lay the foundation for your study by asking yourself, Why did the author (and God) write the book? What did they want to accomplish? What is the book about?

Then, in lesson two, you will begin analyzing successive passages in detail. Thinking about how a paragraph fits into the overall goal of the book will help you to see its purpose. Its purpose will help you see its meaning. Frequently reviewing a chart or outline of the book will enable you to make these connections.

Finally, in the last lesson, you will review the whole book, returning to the big picture to see whether your view of it has changed after closer study. Review will also strengthen your grasp of major issues and give you an idea of how you have grown from your study.

Kinds of Questions

Bible study on your own—without a structured guide—follows a progression. First you observe: What does the passage *say*? Then you interpret: What does the passage *mean*? Lastly you apply: How does this truth affect my life? The act of wording a question for the guide nearly always makes it interpretation, however, so you may want to observe first yourself.

Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clearcut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don’t let your study become an exercise of knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God’s Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, “Lord, what do you want me to see here?” “Father, why is this true?” “Lord, how does

this apply to my life?”

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you to remember.

Meditating on verses is an option in several lessons. Its purpose is to let biblical truth sink into your inner convictions so that you will increasingly be able to act on this truth as a natural way of life. You may want to find a quiet place to spend five minutes each day repeating the verse(s) to yourself. Think about what each word, phrase, and sentence means to you. During the rest of the day, remind yourself of the verse(s) at intervals.

Study Aids

A list of reference materials, including a few notes of explanation to help you make good use of them, begins on page 123. This guide is designed to include enough background to let you interpret with just your Bible and the guide. Still, if you want more information on a subject or want to study a book on your own, try the references listed.

Scripture Versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the New International Version of the Bible. Other versions cited are the Revised Standard Version (RSV) and the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

Use any translation you like for study, preferably more than one. A paraphrase, such as the Living Bible or the Good News Bible, is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

Memorizing and Meditating

A Psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you, and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes during each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it over to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return to your passage as often as you can during your day, for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

For Group Study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as

home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and businessmen's studies. Both new and experienced Bible students, new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later years any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per week. However, feel free to split lessons if you want to discuss them more thoroughly. Or, omit some questions in a lesson if preparation or discussion time is limited. You can always return to this guide for personal study later on. You will be able to discuss only a few questions at length, so choose some for discussion and others for background. Make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything that gave them trouble.

Each lesson in the guide ends with a section called *For the Group*. These sections give advice on how to focus a discussion, how you might apply the lesson in your group, how you might shorten a lesson, and so on. The group leader should read each *For the Group* at least a week ahead so that he or she can tell the group how to prepare for the next lesson.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all the background and discussion questions to be covered. If the group decides not to take an hour per week for private preparation, then expect to take at least two meetings per lesson to work through the questions. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray with one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another to resist temptation, assure each other that the other's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. Spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons. Then discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow such sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

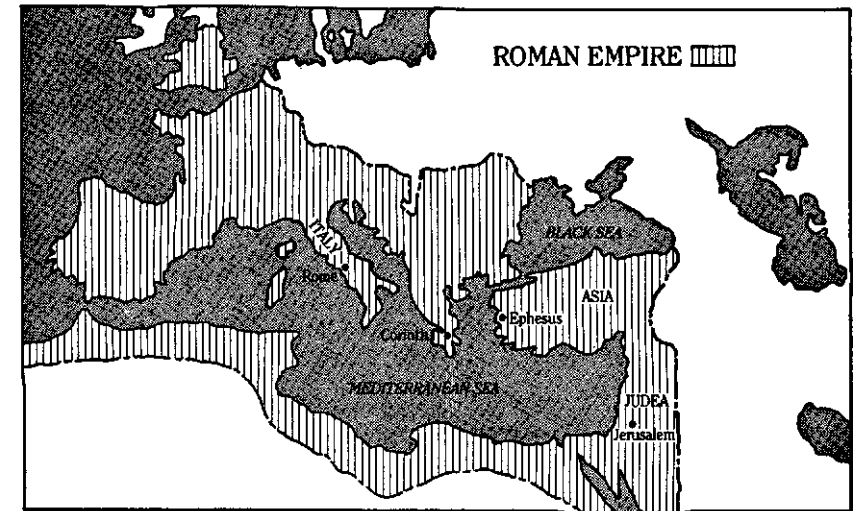
If you write down each other's applications and prayer requests, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about them next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Notes taken during discussion will help you to remember, follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and clarify a total view of an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating. Some groups choose one member at each meeting to take notes. Then someone copies the notes and distributes them at the next meeting. Rotating these tasks can help include people. Some groups have someone take notes on a large pad of paper or erasable marker board (performed shower wallboard works well), so that everyone can see what has been recorded.

Page 126 lists some good sources of counsel for leading group studies. The *Small Group Letter*, published by NavPress, is unique, offering insights from experienced leaders every other month.

PAUL AND EPHESUS

Map of the Roman Empire



The part of the world now known as Turkey basked in prosperity during the first century AD. As one of the older, more stable provinces of the Roman Empire, it seemed far from the turmoil of border provinces like Palestine and Gaul. Agriculture, industry and commerce all flourished under Roman protection, and travel was safe, although still expensive.

Asia boasted seven urban centers, of which the queen was Ephesus. Through her port passed goods from China and inland Asia Minor bound for Italy. Wide avenues, huge public buildings and squares, and luxurious private homes were designed to impress tourists. The theater could hold 25,000 people. Dozens of temples used color and symbols to attract the eye, and the greatest of

these, dedicated to Artemis of the Ephesians, was known throughout the Empire as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It was four times the size of the Parthenon.

Powerful and powerless

A hundred local aristocrats controlled the city council of Ephesus, which governed the city for Rome. These men also owned most of the surrounding land and the major industries, and so were fabulously rich.

However, the strength of the city was its large class of merchants, businessmen, and craftsmen. Some were rich, but never so rich as the aristocrats. This “middle class” was highly mobile; a slave-craftsman might well become a prosperous free businessman. Trade associations organized wealthy owners with poor craftsmen, free citizens with resident aliens and slaves. However, everyone was acutely aware of his own and others’ social status at any moment.

In political power, every non-aristocrat was equal—equally powerless. Yet, as long as trade and industry prospered, people accepted the system. Occasionally a riot or strike flared when a particular group felt threatened economically, but these were quickly controlled. The urban poor were quieted by a combination of strict discipline with free bread and entertainment. Tenant farmers on aristocrats’ estates were isolated.

Religion for propaganda

Asian cities comprised dozens of ethnic groups with often contradictory social and economic systems. The Jewish population of Asia was the fourth largest in the Empire. Rome encouraged ethnic groups to mix, believing that people would be more docile if they thought of themselves as members of one world order. Hence, propaganda about the Roman Peace abounded, and religious and philosophical ideas supported it.

The Roman cult of the emperor was an attempt to foster patriotism, but it affected civic leaders almost exclusively. It touched ordinary people only when they had to offer incense to the emperor’s personal guardian deity during an oath.

Roman state religion was distinct from the emperor cult. However, it was just as indifferent to heartfelt faith; it was a system of precise rites done to gain the favor of supernatural powers for the community. “Piety” meant the faithful fulfillment of duties. Personal or mystical religious experience, magic, and anything new won disapproval.

Syncretism

On the other hand, Romans were always open to rites long used to please previously unknown powers. They especially admired anything which seemed Greek, but they absorbed the practices of most of the peoples they conquered.

Originally, each ethnic group had had its own local cult, none of which claimed authority outside a specific place. However, when Greeks had moved east or Asians west, they had brought their gods. In the cities, peoples had lived side by side, each with their own religions. Over time, though, the ties to place of origin weakened. Neighbors had to come to terms with each other’s practices, and since no one claimed exclusive truth, people easily translated foreign ways into their own idioms. They understood gods with vaguely similar traits to be the same gods with various names. Thus, the Greeks called the Asian fertility goddess “Artemis,” and assigned to her the traits of both Greek and Asian tradition. The Romans understood her as “Diana” by the same process. Cult practices were also borrowed, as people learned what seemed equally valid ways of worshipping a god. This mixing of Greek and eastern religions is called *syncretism*.

Style without substance

Ephesus had temples dedicated to gods with Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Asian, and Persian names, or combinations thereof like “Zeus-Sarapis.” Each temple had its priests with colored robes and shaven heads available to explain the myth of the god and to accept sacrifices. Butcher shops were connected with temples to sell the meat after the ritual slaughter. However, incense was replacing animal sacrifice except for festivals. Daily worship with hymns, prayers, lamps, and incense had become common for the most popular cults, and sermons might be preached on special days. Yet, with rare exceptions, the old gods were losing the deep attachment of the people. The state still supported them, and rich men showed their wealth by financing magnificent temples, but most people had enthusiasm only for the elaborate festivals, processions, and games with which cults vied for attention.

Paul’s conversion

Paul was a Jew by birth, but a Jew of a curious sort. He was born in the first decade AD in Tarsus, a small but prosperous city on the trade route from Syria to Asia Minor. Somehow, Paul obtained educations both in the Greek disciplines of rhetoric and classical literature and in the Pharisaic approach to Jewish law. He must have attended Greek schools with Gentiles (non-Jews) and learned about God in a synagogue of Greek-speaking Pharisees. His “Bible” would have been the *Septuagint*, the Jewish Scriptures in Greek.

The word *Pharisee* comes from a Hebrew word which means “the separated ones,” for the Pharisees felt God had set them apart to study and live by *Torah* (the Law, or Teaching, of Moses). They expected a *Messiah* (Hebrew for “Anointed One,” Greek: *Christ*, the Savior God would send to liberate Israel), but one very different from Jesus. Thus when some Jews began to preach that Jesus was the Messiah, many Pharisees fought them furiously.

But around 35 AD, Jesus confronted Paul in a blinding encounter (Acts 9:1-19), revealing to Paul that he was persecuting the very God he professed to worship. Paul’s life now turned from a Pharisaic observance of God’s

law to a devoted obedience to Jesus Christ, the revealed Messiah. Paul realized that because of Jesus, Pharisaic law-keeping was no longer necessary and could even conflict with God's will. He joined the very faction of Jews he had been persecuting. Soon after, God commissioned him to proclaim the Messiah not just to those who were already God's chosen, but also to those who had not known Him.

Paul in Ephesus

Paul had been a missionary for about seventeen years before he reached Ephesus (Acts 18:19-21). After two of his fellow-missionaries had prepared the ground for several months, Paul came and set up his customary headquarters for long-term evangelism in a province (Acts 19-20). With the colleagues he brought with him and with some Christians already in Ephesus, he founded a network of house-churches. This network eventually spread to several cities in Asia.

Paul's first converts were probably Jews and "God-fearers." "God-fearer" was the Jewish term for Gentiles who wanted to follow the worship and ethics of the Lord but did not want to formally renounce their culture nor undergo circumcision. Most new Christians would have been members of the middle class looking for truth and security, but probably not for a total change in lifestyle and attitudes. Individuals might have independently committed their lives to Jesus, but slaves and women were not very free to choose a religion. On the other hand, if a head of a household decided to follow Christ, his children, wife, slaves, and clients often did so with him. Thus, the infant church in a town was built of households, all meeting in the home of one of its more prosperous members. As a church outgrew a house, some households broke off to meet in another home.

Paul and his team spent two and a half years in Ephesus making converts and training leaders to take responsibility once the mission team left. While in Ephesus, Paul wrote letters to some of the similar church-networks he had founded earlier (in Galatia, Corinth, etc.), practical letters in which he tried to settle disputes of church policy.

Paul's letter to Ephesus

After leaving Ephesus, Paul applied himself to unifying the churches he had already established into one Church, but a trip to Jerusalem led to his imprisonment first there and eventually in Rome (Acts 21:27—28:31). After some two years he was probably released, about 60 AD. Two or three years later, he was rearrested and returned to Rome, where he probably wrote this letter to Ephesus. The Roman authorities tried and executed him shortly thereafter.

Since many of the best early manuscripts do not include the words "in Ephesus" in the first sentence of the letter, many scholars believe that Paul wrote it to circulate among the churches in several Asian cities. Other scholars think that the letter was for those gentile Christians in Ephesus, and perhaps in other cities, who had become believers after Paul left. Either of these theories would explain why Paul addressed his readers as though he had never met them.

LESSON ONE

OVERVIEW AND EPHESIANS 1:1-2

To the Saints

Before you get immersed in the details of Paul's words, take an overview of the whole letter. Potentially confusing verses will be clearer later if you can see how they fit into Paul's overall message.

First Impressions

1. The best preparation for grasping Ephesians is to read it through several times, comparing various versions. Try reading it aloud. Get a general impression.
2. Describe the mood (tone, feeling) of the letter. (Is Paul formal, intimate, angry, jubilant . . . ? Is he writing a story, a personal message, a sermon . . . ? Is he describing, giving direction, trying to persuade?) If the mood changes anywhere, note where it changes.

3. Repetition is a clue to the ideas a writer considers most important to his message. What words or ideas occur over and over in Paul's letter?

Broad outline

4. Reread the letter, preferably in a fresh translation. This time, think of a short phrase or sentence to describe what each main section of the book is about. (These major sections are probably groups of paragraphs.)

1:1-2 *Paul greets the saints.*

1:3-14 _____

1:15-23 _____

2:1-10 _____

2:11-22 _____

3:1-13 _____

3:14-21 _____

4:1-16 _____

4:17-32 _____

5:1-20 _____

5:21-6:9 _____

6:10-20 _____

6:21-24 _____

5. Paul's message seems to divide into two main sections, chapters 1-3 and 4-6. What do you think each section is about? What does the purpose of each seem to be?

1-3 _____

4-6 _____

Theme/purpose

6. What do you think was Paul's reason for writing this letter? What does its content suggest he was trying to accomplish?

7. Try to state the main message of Paul's letter in one sentence. Think about the themes of each half

of the letter. If you need more than one sentence at this point, use more.

8. If you have not already done so, read the historical background on pages 9-12. Is there any information that seems particularly helpful to you in understanding the book of Ephesians? Please explain briefly.

Study Skill—Bible Study Aids

If you would like to study the background of Ephesians in greater depth, consult one of the sources listed on pages 123-127. These and similar commentaries will also be quite helpful to you if you decide to study another book of the Bible on your own.

Greetings

Jewish letters of Paul's day commonly opened with a sentence giving the titles of sender and addressee. Then came a sentence wishing peace and blessings to the addressee.

An *apostle* (verse 1) is "one who is sent." In its

narrow sense, the word meant one of a small group of men whom the church recognized as having special authority from God to clarify the policy and teaching of the whole body. Paul may have been the only one of this group who was not one of Jesus' disciples, and he was conscious of his status.

Saints (verse 1) were literally, "holy ones." The Greek Old Testament used the word for the people of Israel—God's chosen. Paul included all whom God had made holy, even gentile believers in Christ.

Grace (verse 2) is "favor shown by a superior to an inferior."¹ It is especially God's free decision to include the Gentiles into His people. But Paul mentioned other gracious gifts in his letter (3:7, 4:7, 4:11). He used this term of God's kindness to humanity instead of the usual Greek greeting *rejoice* and in addition to the Jewish *peace*.

Peace (verse 2) is "wholeness," that is, "a gift of God affecting the totality of psychic, physical, personal, familial, economic, and political dimensions of man's life."² Like grace, peace referred to social relationships, man-man and man-God. According to the Old Testament prophets, peace would be fulfilled when the Messiah ruled.

9. Is there any part of this lesson that specifically touches upon an area of your life in which you'd like to make a change? If so, write it down here, and try to come up with some practical way you could begin to work on this area with God's help.

10. In your initial readings of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, you may have come across concepts you'd like clarified or questions you'd like answered as you go deeper into this study. While

For Thought and Discussion: What do you think Paul wanted to communicate by describing himself and his readers as in verse 1?

Optional Application: Consider Paul's concern for Christians he did not know personally, and his sense of responsibility toward them as an apostle of Christ. Do you have any responsibility for the spiritual integrity of other believers? If so, in what areas do you feel qualified to help them?

In what areas do you feel yourself lacking, but would like to grow so you could help others?

your thoughts are still fresh, you may want to jot down your questions here to serve as personal objectives for your investigation of this letter.

For the group

Unless you already know each other well, you might spend some time in your next few meetings establishing trust, common ground, and a sense of where each person is coming from. This may help you to discuss frankly how Ephesians applies to you later on. This meeting, share something of your histories—for example, what you remember about being nine years old, or the first place you lived. Discussing question 9 or the “Optional Application” will help to show each other how you see yourselves.

Compare your passage titles and theme statement to those in the chart on page 19. There is no one right answer, so discuss why you prefer one title to another. Group members who felt successful with these projects should share how they went about thinking of titles and seeing themes.

1. Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3*, Anchor Bible Volume 34 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1974), page 74.
2. Barth, page 74.

Chart of Ephesians

Paul's theme: Know who you are before God through Christ, and live according to that identity.

The Foundation	Know who you are before God through Christ	1:1-2 Paul greets the saints.
		1:3-14 Paul praises God for His preplanned spiritual blessings.
		1:15-23 Paul prays that we would understand these blessings.
		2:1-10 Paul teaches the individual's new position because of God's blessings.
		2:11-22 Paul teaches the group's new position because of God's blessings.
		3:1-13 Paul explains his own mission: to proclaim God's blessings.
The Application	Live Christ-centered lives because of your new identity	3:14-21 Paul prays that we would know God's blessings in our deepest being.
		4:1-16 Paul urges unity based on the common foundation.
		4:17-32 Paul urges holiness based on the common foundation.
		5:1-20 Paul urges a walk in love, light, and wisdom based on the common foundation.
		5:21-6:9 Paul urges submission based on the common foundation.
		6:10-20 Paul urges steadfast warfare against spiritual forces based on the common foundation.
		6:21-24 Paul closes.