

LIVING THE LETTERS Ephesians

Sample from *Living the Letters: Ephesians* | ISBN 1600060307

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LIVING THE LETTERS Ephesians

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BRINGING TRUTH TO LIFE

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ABOUT THE LIVING THE LETTERS SERIES

Letters take time to write, usually much more time than talk. They require a certain level of artfulness and thoughtfulness in expression. Then they remain, to be reread, perhaps to be stored away for another day of reading, or even to be encountered some distant time by a future, unknown eavesdropper. All of these aspects of the letter invite soulfulness: rereading is a form of reflective meditation; keeping letters honors memory and not only daily living; and speaking to a reader not yet present in this life respects the soul's eternal nature.

—THOMAS MOORE, *SOUL MATES*

This isn't your typical Bible study. You won't find any blanks to fill in, questions with obvious answers, or maps of Paul's missionary journeys.

So what is it? That's a good question. Think of this book as an opportunity. It's a chance to allow God's Spirit to speak to you in a way that he's done for centuries—through letters.

Unfortunately, we live in a time when many consider e-mail a form of letter writing. Every once in a while, it might be. But usually it's not. Think about it: E-mail is often written quickly and absentmindedly. How many times have you clicked *send* and then thought, *Oh, no!*

As Moore points out in the above quote, letter writing takes time. Letter reading does too. So you can view this as an opportunity to add time to your day or at least to spend what time you have in a worthy manner.

This collection of paper and ink takes Paul's letter to the Ephesians and surrounds it with letters and journal entries from others in history who seemed to be trying to invite some of the same *reflective meditation*. Please understand that this isn't a subtle attempt to equate a letter or journal entry of Samuel Rutherford with the divinely inspired letter written by Paul. If anything, it's an attempt to underscore the timeless quality of God's correspondence with humanity—and to be aware of God speaking in a letter written by Garrison Keillor or by your Aunt Sue.

Briefly, each lesson includes an entry from Paul's letter to the Ephesians (using Eugene Peterson's *The Message*), followed by several other "letters" and a poem from contemporary writers. The challenge is to read and reread these letters. Come back and read them again days or weeks later. Questions and statements along the way will challenge you to engage the words on the page, prodding your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Yet don't approach any of this quickly or absentmindedly; rather, aim to live over and over again what you read and learn.

In so doing, might your life resemble something meditative, memorable, and eternal. *Live the letters.*

HOW TO APPROACH LIVING THE LETTERS

This NavStudy is meant to be completed on your own and in a small group. You'll want to line up your reflection group (or whatever you want to call it) ahead of time. A group of four to six is optimal—any larger, and one or more members will likely be shut out of discussions. Your group can also be as small as two. Each person will need his or her own copy of this book.

Lessons follow the rhythm of *lectio divina*, the ancient practice of *divine reading*. The four movements are the ingredients of a spiritual frame of mind: (1) *Read*—the recitation of a short text of Scripture; (2) *Think*—an effort to wrestle with the meaning of a passage and make it personally relevant; (3) *Pray*—responding to the text and asking for God's grace in doing so; and (4) *Live*—experiencing God's love and his will for you. Divine reading has also been described in this way: Reading lies on the surface, thinking moves to the inner substance, praying involves voicing the desire, and living is the experience.

For each lesson in this book, use the four movements as follows:

1. *Read* the Scripture passage and the other readings in each section. Let them soak in. Saturate your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Reread if necessary. There's no blue ribbon for finishing quickly. Make notes in the white space on the page. If you like journaling, think of this as a space to journal.

2. *Think* about what you read. Take your time and respond to the questions provided. In addition to the questions, always ask, "What does this mean?" and "Why does this matter?" about the readings. Use your reflections to generate discussion with the other people in your group. Allow the experience of others to broaden your wisdom. You'll definitely be stretched—called on to evaluate what you've discovered

and asked to make practical sense of it. In community, this stretching can often be painful and sometimes even embarrassing. However, your willingness to be transparent—your openness to the possibility of personal growth—will reap great rewards.

3. *Pray.* That sounds so easy, doesn't it? But we all know it's not. In each lesson, read the poem provided and let God's Spirit cause words and phrases to stand out and be combined with the thoughts from the readings. Then allow that combination to be your prayer. It won't sound like a regular prayer; in fact, let this time expand your usual practice of prayer. At times, you might not be able to voice your thoughts aloud. Remember, the Spirit intercedes for us, interpreting even our "groans" to the Father.

4. *Live.* *Live* as in rhymes with *give*. How can you live out the thoughts, feelings, emotions, truths, challenges, and confessions you've experienced in the lesson? Each lesson will encourage you to write a letter to yourself. When your group gets together, talk over these letters. Commit to living out what you express in your letter, and ask your small group to hold you accountable with prayer and support.

TIPS FOR SMALL GROUPS

After going through each week's lesson on your own, sit down with a few other people and go deeper. Here are a few thoughts on how to make the most of that time.

Set ground rules. You don't need many. Here are two:

First, you'll want to commit, as a group, to see this through to completion. Significant personal growth happens when group members spend enough time together to really get to know each other. It doesn't have to be every week, but you do need to establish some element of consistency to your time together.

Second, agree together that everyone's story is important. Time is probably the most valuable commodity today, so if you have just an hour to spend together, do your best to give each person ample time to express concerns, pass along insights, and feel like a participating member of the group. Small-group discussions aren't monologues; however, a one-person-dominated discussion isn't always a bad thing either. Not only is your role in a small group to explore and expand your own understanding, it's also to support one another. If one group member truly needs more of the floor, give it to that person. There will be times when the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many. Use good judgment and allow extra space when needed; *your* time might be the next time your group meets.

Meet regularly. Choose a time and place, and stick to it. Don't be surprised if this becomes a struggle. Go into this study with that expectation and push through it.

Let God lead. Each time you get together, guess who else is in the room? That's right—God. Be sensitive to how he is leading. Does your time need to be structured? If so, following the book's structure is a good idea. Does the time need breathing room instead? Then take a breath, step back, and see what God does.

Talk openly. You'll all be a little tentative at first. You're not a bad person if you're hesitant to unpack all your *stuff* in front of friends or new acquaintances. Maybe you're just a little skeptical about the value of revealing to others the deepest parts of who you are. Maybe you're simply too afraid of what those revelations might sound or look like. Discomfort isn't the goal; rather, the goal is a safe place to share and be. But don't neglect what brings you to this place—the desire to be known and to find meaning for your life. And don't forget that God brings you to this place; you're not a part of your group by chance. Stretch yourself. Dip your feet in the water of honest discussion. Healing can often be found there.

Stay on task. Do you know what TMI is? Too much information. Don't spill unnecessary stuff. Talk-show transparency does little more than bolster ratings and reveal a lack of preparation. If structure isn't your group's strength, then try this approach: Spend a few minutes sharing general comments about the study, and then take each question and give everyone in the group a chance to respond.

While you're listening to others, write down thoughts that their words prompt within you. When you get to the Pray section, listen to each other read prayers aloud. Finally, give time to each person's Live section. What did each of you experience in writing a letter to yourself?

Follow up. Don't let the life application drift away without further action. Be accountable to each other and refer to previous lessons' Live sections often. Take time at the beginning of your group's meeting to review and see how you're doing. Pray for each other between times you get together. Call group members who God brings to your mind and simply ask, "How ya doin'?"

LETTER 1
IDENTITY

"It's in Christ that we find out who we are
and what we are living for."

(EPHESIANS 1:11)

Before You Begin

Take just a few moments to still your heart and mind.
Remember, God desires to speak to *you* in these
moments.

*You got me when I was an unformed youth,
God, and taught me everything I know.*

PSALM 71:17

READ**Ephesians 1:11-19**

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This signet from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.

That's why, when I heard of the solid trust you have in the Master Jesus and your outpouring of love to all the followers of Jesus, I couldn't stop thanking God for you—every time I prayed, I'd think of you and give thanks. But I do more than thank. I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength!

THINK

"I took all this in and thought it through, inside and out." (Ecclesiastes 9:1)

- "It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for." That sentence might be worth the price of this book. Do you believe it? Reflect on what informs your answer.
- Would you describe your life as "glorious living"? If so, give some details. If not, how would you describe it?

- Reread this passage and underline or highlight the ways Paul prays. Do you have anyone in your life who prays for you like that? Do you pray in that way for someone else?

READ

From *Between the Dreaming and the Coming True* by Robert Benson¹

Four

The great risk is not that we will fail to qualify to be reunited with God. The risk is that we will somehow fail to understand why we are here. That we will end up believing that we are being punished because Adam and Eve were barking up the wrong tree. That we will be so fearful of the stories about separating the sheep from the goats that we will end up believing that it is okay to try and have God all to ourselves and shut out those who do not look, act, sound, believe, or worship the way we do. That we will see those stories as the only authentic God stories and put little faith in the ones about hungry prodigals and redeemed tax collectors and Johnny-come-lately yard workers and the lucky sinners brought in to fill up the banquet halls.

We are not here to show something to God. We are here because God—the One who wants to be completely known—has something to show to us.

THINK

“I took all this in and thought it through, inside and out.” (Ecclesiastes 9:1)

- What’s your initial reaction to Benson’s words? Anything that speaks to you and makes you respond “Aha—yes!” or “No way!”?
- Can you think of a time when you were among what Benson referred to as “hungry prodigals, redeemed tax collectors, Johnny-come-lately workers . . . lucky sinners”? What do you think God was showing you during that time?

THINK (continued)

READ

From *The Sacred Romance* by Brent Curtis and John Eldredge²

The Message of the Arrows

The deepest questions we ever ask are directly related to our heart's greatest needs, and the answers life gives us shape our image of ourselves, of life, and of God. *Who am I?* The Romance whispers that we are someone special, that our heart is good because it is made for someone good; the Arrows tell us we are a dime a dozen, worthless, even dark and twisted, dirty. *Where is life to be found?* The Romance tells us life will flourish when we give it away in love and heroic sacrifice. The Arrows tell us that we must arrange for what little life there may be, manipulating our world and all the while watching our backs. "God is good," the Romance tells us. "You can release the well-being of your heart to him." The Arrows strike back, "Don't ever let life out of your control," and they seem to impale with such authority, unlike the gentle urges of the Romance, that in the end we are driven to find some way to contain them. The only way seems to be to kill our longing for the Romance, much in the same way we harden our heart to someone who hurts us. *If I don't want so much*, we believe, *I won't be so vulnerable*. Instead of dealing with the Arrows, we silence the longing. That seems to be our only hope. And so we lose heart.

THINK

"I took all this in and thought it through, inside and out." (Ecclesiastes 9:1)

- "Who am I?" "Where do I find life?" How would you respond to these questions?
- Take some time and ponder the voice of love and the voice of shame. Right now, which voice is stronger in your life?

THINK (continued)

READ

From *Telling Secrets* by Frederick Buechner³

The White Tower

Genesis points to a mystery greater still. It says that we come from farther away than space and longer ago than time. It says that evolution and genetics and environment explain a lot about us but they don't explain all about us or even the most important thing about us. It says that though we live in the world, we can never be entirely at home in the world. It says in short not only that we were created by God but also that we were created in God's image and likeness. We have something of God within us the way we have something of the stars. . . .

This is the self we are born with, and then of course the world does its work. Starting with the rather too pretty young woman, say, and the charming but rather unstable young man who together know no more about being parents than they do about the far side of the moon, the world sets in to making us into what the world would like us to be, and because we have to survive after all, we try to make ourselves into something that we hope the world will like better than it apparently did the selves we originally were. That is the story of all our lives, needless to say, and in the process of living out that story, the original, shimmering self gets buried so deep that most of us end up hardly living out of it at all. Instead we live out all the other selves which we are constantly putting on and taking off like coats and hats against the world's weather.

THINK

"I took all this in and thought it through, inside and out." (Ecclesiastes 9:1)

- How about you? Have you tried to make yourself into something the world would like better than the way God created you? Think through your reasons for being content or dissatisfied with the way God made you.

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- “I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ . . . to make you intelligent and discerning . . . so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do” (Ephesians 1:18). Do you think Paul prayed that we would rediscover who God intended us to be? Why or why not?

READ

From *Walking on Water* by Madeleine L'Engle⁴

A Coal in the Hand

My son-in-law, Alan Jones, told me a story of a Hassidic rabbi, renowned for his piety. He was unexpectedly confronted one day by one of his devoted youthful disciples. In a burst of feeling, the young disciple exclaimed, "My master, I love you!" The ancient teacher looked up from his books and asked his fervent disciple, "Do you know what hurts me, my son?"

The young man was puzzled. Composing himself, he stammered, "I don't understand your question, Rabbi. I am trying to tell you how much you mean to me, and you confuse me with irrelevant questions."

"My question is neither confusing nor irrelevant," rejoined the rabbi, "For if you do not know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?"

THINK

"I took all this in and thought it through, inside and out." (Ecclesiastes 9:1)

- Whoa! What's your reaction to the story of the rabbi? Think about the people who say they love you. Do they know what hurts you?
- Do *you* know what hurts you? Rest assured, that's not an "irrelevant question."

READ

From *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen⁵

Claiming Childhood

(Nouwen's reflections take place in the aftermath of an encounter with Rembrandt's painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.)

The younger son's return takes place in the very moment that he reclaims his sonship, even though he has lost all the dignity that belongs to it. In fact, it was the loss of everything that brought him to the bottom line of his identity. He hit the bedrock of his sonship. In retrospect, it seems that the prodigal had to lose everything to come into touch with the ground of his being. When he found himself desiring to be treated as one of the pigs, he realized that he was not a pig but a human being, a son of his father. This realization became the basis for his choice to live instead of to die. Once he had come again in touch with the truth of his sonship, he could hear—although faintly—the voice calling him the Beloved and feel—although distantly—the touch of blessing. This awareness of and confidence in his father's love, misty as it may have been, gave him the strength to claim for himself his sonship, even though that claim could not be based on any merit.

THINK

"I took all this in and thought it through, inside and out." (Ecclesiastes 9:1)

- In one way or another, we've each been the prodigal. Think back to a time when you left and then returned. What did you lose while you were gone? Do you think you lost a certain kind of dignity during that time? Think on this awhile.
- Maybe you're still away from home or the Father or whatever. Or maybe you've returned home (literally or figuratively). What happened that brought you to your senses?

THINK (continued)

PRAY

Slowly read the following poem a couple of times. What speaks to you? Ask God to bring a word or phrase to the surface. Then allow that word or phrase to begin your prayer. It might seem awkward at first. Fine, let it be awkward. But stick with it.

A Story That Could Be True

If you were exchanged in the cradle and
 your real mother died
 without ever telling the story
 then no one knows your name,
 and somewhere in the world
 your father is lost and needs you
 but you are far away.

He can never find
 how true you are, how ready.
 When the great wind comes
 and the robberies of the rain
 you stand on the corner shivering.
 The people who go by—
 you wonder at their calm.

They miss the whisper that runs
 any day in your mind,
 “Who are you really, wanderer?” —
 and the answer you have to give
 no matter how dark and cold
 the world around you is:
 “Maybe I’m a king.”

— WILLIAM STAFFORD⁶

LIVE

These words from Stafford’s poem serve as a reminder of this section’s theme—*identity*:

and the answer you have to give
no matter how dark and cold
the world around you is:
“Maybe I’m a king.”

You’ve read from the journal entries, letters, and poems of others. Now it’s your turn. What does God want you to live when it comes to *identity*? Use the space below to write a letter to yourself. You might want to date the letter so you can later reflect on where you were and what was going on in your life regarding *identity*.

Date _____

Dear _____