

## **Growing Up Together – Introduction**

*This is the introductory lesson for an online Bible study through the book of Ephesians. The entire lesson is posted below. You can read it here and answer the questions in a journal or you can download the PDF or Word Doc and print a hard copy. Either way, I would love for all of you to interact with me and each other in the comments section of this blog page. Post insights, ask questions, and discuss the lesson. Let's get started!*

**Grace.** Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus is a beautiful declaration of God's grace working in our lives. From salvation, throughout our earthly life, and into eternity, God graciously works in us to bring us to our full potential in Christ.

*Ephesians presents God's purpose, power, and plan for living the abundant life in Christ.*

Our salvation is just the beginning of what God wants to do in our lives. He has earthly plans and spiritual purposes He wants to accomplish through us, by His power working in us. In order to accomplish these plans and purposes, God must grow us up spiritually until we reach "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (4:13).

Our salvation is God's work from beginning to end. And only the Holy Spirit has the power to transform us into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18; Eph 1:19-20). But as we will see in Ephesians, both the individual and the church have indispensable roles in a believer's spiritual growth. Our spiritual maturity is a joint venture! God, the believer, and the church work together to grow us up in Christ.

### **Cooperative Effort**

Let's take a quick look at each role. But first, I want to emphasize that neither individual believers nor the church can fulfill the role God has given us without His grace and power working in us to accomplish it. Isn't it amazing that God includes us in the work that only He can do?!

**God's Role:** *Read Ephesians 2:8-9. Describe this work of God's grace in our lives.*

***Our Role: Read Ephesians 4:17 and 5:1. Describe God's expectations for the individual believer.***

***The Church's Role: Read Ephesians 4:11-13. Describe God's intention for the church in the lives of believers.***

I hope this "sampling" whet your appetite for what we are going to explore in depth together over the next 6 weeks. Next Wednesday we will start with Ephesians chapter one! But before we end our time together today, let's briefly discuss the background of the book to gain the context we need to best understand the letter.

### **Background and Beginnings**

It is generally and traditionally accepted that the Apostle Paul (1:1 and 3:1) wrote this letter to the Christians in Ephesus in the early 60's AD from prison in Rome (3:1, 3:13, 4:1 and 6:20). Likely, the letter was also intended to be circulated to the other churches in the Roman province of Asia as well. That would include the seven churches mentioned in Revelation.

Paul established the Ephesian church during his second missionary journey around 50-51AD. Since, Ephesus was the capitol of Asia and a hub for commerce, rooting Christianity here provided the opportunity for growth throughout that part of the world.

***Read Acts 18:18-21. Paul's first visit to Ephesus was brief, he could not stay. Who did he leave behind to carry on the work he started?***

Paul spent about three years, approximately 52-55, in Ephesus during his third missionary journey (see Acts 19:1-41 and 20:1). What struck me as I read this account in Acts was the power with which the Gospel message was displayed. This powerful display generated radically different responses.

***Read Acts 19:11-12. In what ways did God display His power and validate the Gospel message?***

***Read Acts 19:17-20. How did those who accept the Gospel respond?***

Now glance over Acts 19:23-41. Those who felt threatened by the message of Christ responded with hatred and violence. Same message. Drastically different responses. Those in Ephesus who hated the message ran Paul out of the city, but the message remained and spread.

Paul's commitment to the message of Christ cost him his freedom and eventually his life at the hand of a Roman executioner. But he would not turn back. When Paul wrote Ephesians, the readers knew he was in prison for his faith in Christ. One of Paul's purposes in writing to them was to make sure his suffering did not discourage them in their commitment to stand firm in their faith (Ephesians 3:13). In fact, he encouraged them to continue to grow to reach their full potential in Christ (4:13).

***For discussion: As we close our first lesson in Ephesians prayerfully consider your spiritual condition. Are you steadily growing in spiritual maturity? Are you discouraged and tempted to give up? Or maybe you're somewhere in between and need encouragement to keep moving forward toward God's purpose for you. Where are you now?***

### **Weekly Challenge**

*(Each week, in addition to the weekly lesson, I will provide an opportunity – for those who have the time and desire – to go a little deeper. If you are unable to do this, please don't worry, but if you can, take the plunge!)*

Before next Wednesday, read the entire book of Ephesians in one sitting. It's just six chapters! Keep a pen and paper handy. As you read, take note of the following recurring themes:

- God's grace
- The intercession of Christ on our behalf (lots of "with/in/through/by Christ")
- Contrast of life without Christ and life with Christ
- Praise and prayer