



DISCIPLE *for* LIFE

Ephesians

YOUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST

Tony Merida

LifeWay Press®
Nashville, Tennessee

Published by LifeWay Press® • © 2016 Tony Merida

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ISBN 978-1-4300-6552-4 • Item 005792212

Dewey decimal classification: 227.5

Subject headings: BIBLE. N.T. EPHESIANS \ CHRISTIAN LIFE \ DISCIPLESHIP

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Printed in the United States of America

Groups Ministry Publishing • LifeWay Resources • One LifeWay Plaza • Nashville, TN 37234-0152



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Introduction

Most of us think we searched for and found our identity during our teenage or college years. But in reality many of us are still trying to find it. When we don't get the promotion at work, we spiral into an emotional wasteland. When our pants fit a little more snugly than they used to, we freak out. When someone questions whether the talent we're reputed to be good at is truly good, we're shaken to our core.

The Book of Ephesians has an abundance of wisdom to share with us that will reveal where our identity should be anchored. When we anchor our identity in Christ, the shifting winds of change that inevitably happen in life won't sink our ship.

Over the next six weeks we'll look at these topics from Ephesians:

1. "The Struggle in Ephesus": where our identity is centered
2. "New Life in Christ": our identity reconciled with God
3. "New Life in Community": our identity reconciled with people
4. "Pursuing Unity in Christ": our identity unified in the local church
5. "Pursuing Holiness in Christ": how our identity shapes our behavior
6. "Be Strong in Christ": the war against our identity

My prayer is that everyone will dig deeply into the truths of Scripture as we pursue honesty with ourselves and our small groups. The more we're vulnerable with our weaknesses, the closer and safer our groups will become. The closer and safer our groups become, the healthier we'll become, and the more we'll begin living in the freedom and strength of our identity in Christ.

How to Use This Study

This Bible study book includes six weeks of content. Each week has an introductory page summarizing the focus of the week's study, followed by content designed for groups and individuals.

GROUP SESSIONS

Regardless of the day of the week your group meets, each week of content begins with the group session. This group session is designed to be one hour or more, with approximately 15 to 20 minutes of teaching and 45 minutes of personal interaction. It's even better if your group is able to meet longer than an hour, allowing more time for participants to interact with one another.

Each group session uses the following format to facilitate simple yet meaningful interaction among group members, with God's Word, and with the video teaching by a group of trusted pastors.

Start

This page includes questions to get the conversation started and to introduce the video segment.

Watch

This page includes key points from the video teaching, along with space for taking notes as participants watch the video.

Discuss

These two pages include questions and statements that guide the group to respond to the video teaching and to relevant Bible passages.

Pray

This final page of each group session includes a prompt for a closing time of prayer together and space for recording prayer requests of group members.

INDIVIDUAL DISCOVERY

Each *Disciple for Life* small-group resource provides individuals with optional activities during the week, appealing to different learning styles, schedules, and levels of engagement. These options include a plan for application and accountability, a Scripture-reading plan with journaling prompts, a devotion, and two personal studies. You can choose to take advantage of some or all of the options provided.

This Week's Plan

Immediately following the group session's prayer page is a weekly plan offering guidance for everyone to engage with that week's focal point, regardless of a person's maturity level or that week's schedule.

Read

A daily reading plan is outlined for Scriptures related to the group session. Space for personal notes is also provided. Instructions for using the HEAR journaling method for reading Scripture can be found on pages 8–II.

Reflect

A one-page devotional option is provided each week to help members reflect on a biblical truth related to the group session.

Personal Study

Two personal studies are provided each week to take individuals deeper into Scripture and to supplement the biblical truths introduced in the teaching time. These pages challenge individuals to grow in their understanding of God's Word and to make practical application to their lives.

LEADER GUIDE

Pages I20–3I at the back of this book contain a guide that develops a leader's understanding of the thought process behind questions and suggests ways to engage members at different levels of life-changing discussion.

The HEAR Journaling Method for Reading Scripture

Daily Bible Reading

Disciple for Life small-group Bible studies include a daily reading plan for each week. Making time in a busy schedule to focus on God through His Word is a vital part of the Christian life. If you're unable to do anything else provided in your Bible study book during a certain week, try to spend a few minutes in God's Word. The verse selections will take you deeper into stories and concepts that support the teaching and discussion during that week's group session.

Why Do You Need a Plan?

When you're a new believer or at various other times in your life, you may find yourself in a place where you don't know where to begin reading your Bible or how to personally approach Scripture. You may have tried the open-and-point method when you simply opened your Bible and pointed to a verse, hoping to get something out of the random selection from God's Word. Reading random Scriptures won't provide solid biblical growth any more than eating random food from your pantry will provide solid physical growth.

An effective plan must be well balanced for healthy growth. When it comes to reading the Bible, *well balanced* and *effective* mean reading and applying. A regular habit is great, but simply checking a box off your task list when you've completed your daily reading isn't enough. Knowing more about God is also great, but simply reading for spiritual knowledge still isn't enough. You also want to respond to what you're reading by taking action as you listen to what God is saying. After all, it's God's Word.

To digest more of the Word, *Disciple for Life* small-group Bible studies not only provide a weekly reading plan but also encourage you to use a simplified version of the HEAR journaling method. (If this method advances your

personal growth, check out *Foundations: A 260-Day Bible-Reading Plan for Busy Believers* by Robby and Kandi Gallaty.)

Journaling What You HEAR in God’s Word

You may or may not choose to keep a separate journal in addition to the space provided in this book. A separate journal would provide extra space as well as the opportunity to continue your journal after this study is completed. The HEAR journaling method promotes reading the Bible with a life-transforming purpose. You’ll read in order to understand and respond to God’s Word.

The HEAR acronym stands for *highlight*, *explain*, *apply*, and *respond*. Each of these four steps creates an atmosphere for hearing God speak. After settling on a reading plan, like the one provided in this book in the “Read” section each week, establish a time for studying God’s Word. Then you’ll be ready to HEAR from God.

Before You Begin: The Most Important Step

To really HEAR God speak to you through His Word, always begin your time with prayer. Pause and sincerely ask God to speak to you. It’s absolutely imperative that you seek God’s guidance in order to understand His Word (see I Cor. 2:12-14). Every time you open your Bible, pray a simple prayer like the one David prayed: “Open my eyes so that I may contemplate wonderful things from Your instruction” (Ps. 119:18).

H = Highlight

After praying for the Holy Spirit’s guidance, open this book to the week’s reading plan, open a journal if you’d like more space than this book provides, and open your Bible. For an illustration let’s assume you’re reading Philippians 4:10-13. Verse 13 may jump out and speak to you as something you want to remember, so you’d simply highlight that verse in your Bible.

If keeping a HEAR journal, on the top line write the Scripture reference and the date and make up a title to summarize the meaning of the passage. Then write the letter H and record the verse that stood out and that you highlighted in your Bible. This practice will make it easy to look back through your journal to find a passage you want to revisit in the future.

E = Explain

After you've highlighted your verse(s), explain what the text means. Most simply, how would you summarize this passage in your own words? By asking some simple questions, with the help of God's Spirit, you can understand the meaning of the passage or verse. (A good study Bible can help answer more in-depth questions as you learn to explain a passage of Scripture.) Here are a few good questions to get you started:

- Why was the verse or passage written?
- To whom was it originally written?
- How does the verse or passage fit with the verses before and after it?
- Why would the Holy Spirit include this passage in the Bible book?
- What does God intend to communicate through the text?

If keeping a HEAR journal, below the H write the letter E and explain the text in your own words. Record any answers to questions that help you understand the passage of Scripture.

A = Apply

At this point you're beginning the process of discovering the specific personal word God has for you from His Word. What's important is that you're engaging with the text and wrestling with the meaning. Application is the heart of the process. Everything you've done so far coalesces under this heading. As you've done before, answer a series of questions to discover the significance of these verses to you personally, questions like:

- How can this verse or passage help me?
- What's God saying to me?
- What would the application of this verse look like in my life?

These questions bridge the gap between the ancient world and your world today. They provide a way for God to speak to you through the specific passage or verse.

If keeping a HEAR journal, write the letter A under the letter E, where you wrote a short summary explaining the text. Challenge yourself to write between two and five sentences about the way the text applies to your life.

R = Respond

Finally, you'll respond to the text. A personal response may take on many forms. You may write an action step to do, describe a change in perspective, or simply respond in prayer to what you've learned. For example, you may ask for help in being bold or generous, you may need to repent of unconfessed sin, or you may need to praise God. Keep in mind that you're responding to what you've just read.

In this book or in your journal, record your personal application of each passage of Scripture. You may want to write a brief explanation-and-application summary: "The verse means _____, so I can or will _____."

If keeping a HEAR journal, write the letter R, along with the way you'll respond to what you highlighted, explained, and applied.

Notice that all the words in the HEAR method are action words: *highlight, explain, apply, respond*. God doesn't want us to sit back and wait for Him to drop truth into our laps. God wants us to actively pursue Him instead of waiting passively. Jesus said:

Keep asking, and it will be given to you. Keep searching, and you will find. Keep knocking, and the door will be opened to you.

Matthew 7:7

The Struggle in Ephesus

Week 1



Ephesians contains only six chapters. It's a mere 155 verses. If you read it straight through, it would take you about 20 minutes. Yet the rich wisdom packed in this book will take you much longer than 20 minutes to apply and live out. If you want to apply this book, read it slowly. And often.

Paul, the author, writing to the people in Ephesus, started out with a few seemingly benign statements. They would be easy for a reader to gloss over in an attempt to get to "the important stuff." But if you do that, you'll regret it. You'll short-circuit the work God wants to do in your heart instead of digging deeply into who God declared you to be. And who God declared you to be is more powerful than who you feel you are.

The One on whom you fix your eyes is both the source and the object of your identity.

It may seem obvious, but in order to follow Jesus as His disciple, you have to see Him as He truly is. Once you have a clear picture of Jesus, you can fully understand who you are.

Start

Welcome everyone to session 1 of *Ephesians*. Use the following content to begin your group session together.

When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?

What similarities exist between what you do now and what you thought you wanted to do?

As kids, we dreamed. We dreamed of one day playing professional sports, traveling the universe as an astronaut, or being a superhero who can fly.

Deep down we have a desire to do something significant and make a difference in the world. And there's nothing wrong with that desire. There's actually something God-honoring in it. The hero or heroine's story touches us deeply because God wired us for significance. The deeper questions we all have to answer are what define who we are and where we'll find our significance.

In this first session Tony Merida will introduce us to the Book of Ephesians by starting where Paul started the letter: defining our identity.

Pray that God will open your hearts and minds as you watch video session 1.

Watch

Use the space below to follow along and take notes as you watch video session 1.

If your _____ is not in Christ, you will be dissatisfied. You were made for a relationship with God through Christ.

When you become a _____, you become a new person. You get a new identity.

We have to keep feeding our souls with _____.

Are you enjoying the _____ of being in Christ?

You need your _____ to be enthralled with the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

If you love Jesus deeply, it will change your _____ dramatically.

Discuss

Use the following statements and questions to discuss the video.

The most basic yet important question you can ask yourself right now is “Am I in Christ?” The Book of Ephesians is an amazing place to discover who Jesus is and who He created you to be.

How have you seen someone’s behavior change when they started a new relationship?

How does your relationship with Jesus change the way you live your life?

If you’ve been following Jesus for a number of years, how have things changed since your early years of faith?

Read Ephesians 1:1-2 aloud with the group.

Paul, an apostle, wrote this book and started his greeting with the words “Grace to you and peace . . .” (v. 2).

How does knowing you’re covered in grace and peace affect the way you see yourself?

When we read the Bible, we may feel there’s a great detachment between the lives of the people in Scripture and our lives. But the culture Paul described in the Book of Ephesians is hauntingly similar to ours today.

In what things (for example, activities, behaviors, relationships, personas) does culture tell us to find our identity?

According to the video, what did the apostle Paul do in an effort to change the culture in Ephesus? What happened as a result?

How should living in the reality of a new identity change the way you—

interact at work?

receive criticism?

view success?

vacation?

It's easy to see following God as a relationship that limits what we do in life. As you read the Bible, you see the Ten Commandments and a slew of other rules that keep you from doing things. You may be tempted to say, "I wish God would let me ..." But the reality is that being a follower of Jesus and rooting our identity in Him afford us many privileges.

As a follower of Christ whose identity is rooted in Him, what privileges do you have that others don't?

As we dive in to this first week's study, you may have some apprehensions. Or excitement. Or questions.

What are your hopes or expectations for this study of Ephesians?

We all have hopes and expectations in starting this study. God has hopes and expectations for us too.

Conclude the group session with the prayer activity on the following page.

Pray

Each week we'll conclude the group session with two actions.

1. We'll consider our responses to the truth of Scripture and pray for the Holy Spirit to work in our lives in ways we've seen in God's Word.
2. We'll pray for one another, particularly in relation to applying the biblical truths studied and discussed during the group session.

In what ways do you need the grace and peace Paul mentioned in his greeting to the Christians in Ephesus (see Eph. 1:2)?

How will you think or act differently as a result of what God has revealed in His Word?

Spend a few minutes praying for each person in the group. Ask God to reveal Himself and speak clearly to each person during the next six weeks.

Prayer Requests

Encourage members to complete “This Week’s Plan” before the next group session.

This Week's Plan

Work with your group leader each week to create a plan for personal study, worship, and application between sessions. Select from the following optional activities to match your personal preferences and available time.

Worship

- [] Read your Bible. Complete the reading plan on page 20.
- [] Spend time with God by engaging with the devotional experience on page 21.
- [] Connect with God every day in prayer.

Personal Study

- [] Read and interact with “You’re a Saint!” on page 22.
- [] Read and interact with “Don’t Lose Your First Love” on page 26.

Application

- [] Memorize Ephesians 1:2.
- [] Identify an area of your life in which you need grace and peace.
- [] Connect over coffee with someone in the group. Talk further through your thoughts on this week’s study and your expectations for the group going forward.
- [] Start a journal. This week record 10 things in which you’ve rooted your identity, other than Jesus, throughout your life. Based on the discussion in this week’s group session, record 10 truths that would combat those false identities.

Read

Read the following Scripture passages this week. Use the acronym HEAR and the space provided to record your thoughts or action steps.

Day 1: Ephesians I

Day 2: Ephesians 2

Day 3: Ephesians 3

Day 4: Ephesians 4

Day 5: Ephesians 5

Day 6: Ephesians 6

Day 7: Ephesians 1–6

Reflect

TWO IDENTIFIABLE IDENTITY TRUTHS

Did you know you can buy identity-theft insurance? If someone steals your identity, you have a backup plan. You have security in knowing if your identity is stolen, you can recover your losses with minimal damage and can reclaim your lost identity.

Thankfully, our true identity in Christ is secure. Read these passages:

To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

John 1:12

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Romans 15:7, NIV

Notice two key truths about our identity from these verses:

1. When we receive Christ, we become children of God.
2. Our acceptance of others isn't contingent on their actions.
It's contingent on Christ's acceptance of us.

As children of God, we receive all the family benefits: unconditional love, safety, provision, guidance, and much more. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we accept others regardless of how they've treated us, because God has loved us regardless of how we've treated Him. What amazing freedom is that?

Reflect on both of these truths. Which do you need to apply right now?

Personal Study 1

YOU'RE A SAINT!

Impersonating someone else is nothing new.

You may have discussed this fact in the group session. Kids dress up as superheroes, princesses, soldiers, monsters, or grown-ups. Imagination is fun, and imitation is natural.

There's a danger when we try to impersonate others' identities with our faith, though. Read these words from another of Paul's letters:

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."

1 Corinthians 1:10-12

In this passage circle the activities Paul wants us to do.

Underline the dangers he's warning us against.

In Ephesians I Paul used a carefully chosen noun when he addressed the people to whom he wrote his letter. Check it out:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 1:1

While we're off somewhere trying to root our faith in the faith of others by identifying with a certain belief camp or "celebrity" preacher, Paul is calling us saints. Saints! Let that sink into your heart for a moment. (Also notice that Paul used the same word in 1:15,18; 3:8,18; 4:12; 5:3; 6:18.)

Be honest. When you think of a saint, who comes to mind?

What have they done or how did they live that caused you to record their name(s)?

Did you include yourself in that list? Why or why not?

The word *saint* finds its roots in the Old Testament, where God chose a people to be set apart from the other nations, to be His holy people. Now Christ has made us into His holy people (see Eph. 5:26). We're holy, not because of what we've done but because of what Christ has done. In other words, you're not a saint because you've lived a perfect life. You're a saint because Jesus did, and you've placed your faith in Him.

How does being a saint give you comfort and security?

What responsibilities do you feel that you have, now that you know you're a saint?

To be a saint means to be in Christ, or to be in union with Christ. The phrase “in Christ” occurs about 164 times in Paul’s 13 epistles.¹ It’s a central theme in Paul’s writings, and it should be a central theme in our lives. We’re united with Christ in His death as well as in His resurrection (see Eph. 2:5-7). To be in Christ doesn’t mean we’re inside Him. It means we’re one with Him in the same way my arm is a part of my body. When we’re in Christ, our desires are satisfied (see John 6:35), and we can rest eternally at peace, knowing we can’t be snatched out of his hand (see John 10:28-30). We’re protected. We’re secure.

But one thing being in Christ doesn't give us is a lack of opposition. In fact, it may increase opposition. Though Satan can't destroy us, he would love nothing more than to destroy our sense of identity and intimacy with Christ. Temptation and pressure not to follow Christ closely can result in feeling disconnected, alone, and powerless in our spiritual walk.

Though we may be surrounded by opposition on every side, our eternal identity is secure:

All that the Father gives me will come to me,
and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.

John 6:37

List ways you feel opposition even though you know your identity is secure.

List ways being united with Christ provides you with confidence to face opposition.

Close your study time in prayer, asking God to remind you of your sainthood every day.

1. Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Ephesians* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2014), 13.

Personal Study 2

DON'T LOSE YOUR FIRST LOVE

Paul's letter to the Ephesians isn't the only book of the Bible addressing that particular church. We read another account in Scripture about the people in Ephesus. Jesus had a word of correction and encouragement for them in the Book of Revelation:

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

Revelation 2:2-4

This passage identifies three qualities these people possessed that revealed a level of countercultural identity we don't often see today.

What positive traits were the Ephesians known for?

1.

2.

3.

Jesus said, “I know” (v. 2). What thoughts or feelings do you have when you read that Jesus was fully aware of everything—good and bad—in the Ephesians’ lives?

What would you have done differently yesterday when you consider the fact that Jesus knows everything about your heart and actions?

As countercultural as the Ephesians’ admirable qualities were, Jesus also had something against these people.

What did Jesus have against the Ephesians?

How would you describe the tone of Jesus’ words *against* and *abandoned* in verse 4?

What was Jesus’ point when He listed several positive qualities but identified one problem?

What does Jesus’ emphasis reveal about the significance of love?

One of the saddest verses in all of Scripture is this: “You have abandoned the love you had at first” (v. 4). For people to have abandoned a first love means they once had a first love. They were in love with Jesus, but along the way their affections had shifted.

Let’s take a married couple as an example. Let’s assume their marriage of over a decade and their love for each other have never been stronger. They’ve had their share of bumps along the way, but in each season they’ve worked hard to intentionally love each other. The danger for them isn’t that they’ll randomly abandon each other one day. It’s that their love will fade over time. If they cease intentionality in their marriage, their first love will slide into something much less. Even though on the outside everything may seem fine, when our hearts become disengaged, love begins to fade.

Our faith can do the same thing.

In your relationship with God, when have you abandoned your first love? What drew your heart away from Him?

In what parts of your life are you most prone to be motivated by anything other than the love of Christ?

Who in your life can help ensure that you don’t slowly drift, backslide, or lose your genuine love for Christ?

Read Psalm 51.

Now look specifically at verses 10-12:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Psalm 51:10-12

Why did the psalmist need his joy to be restored?

What did he ask God to do to restore it?

When have you needed to ask God to restore your joy? How did He give you back the joy of His salvation?

It's possible for anyone to lose their love for Jesus. Rarely does it happen overnight, but over a series of events and seasons of life, our love can fade. When this happens, it's not the time to throw up our hands in exasperation. It's the time for spiritual renewal! The antidote for losing your love is to fall in love again.

Since you're just beginning this study, take the temperature of where you are in your relationship with God. Ask Him to meet you exactly where you are and to give you grace to grow as you fall more deeply in love with Him.