

A sepia-toned photograph of a person standing on a sandy beach, looking out at the ocean. The waves are breaking onto the shore, and the sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Ephesians

WHO WE ARE
IN CHRIST

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EPHESIANS

A few years ago, some friends and I had the privilege of visiting the ancient city of Ephesus (in modern day southwestern Turkey) with a local pastor friend serving as our driver and tour guide. We, like the other visitors, marveled at the remains and imagined what life in this city was once like. This port city was the fourth or fifth largest city in the world, sitting at the junction of four major roads in Asia Minor, and was known as the supreme metropolis of Asia. It was the center of worship of the fertility goddess Diana (or identified with the Greek goddess Artemis). Now, you can only see the remains of the (former) supreme metropolis of Asia.

Cities and civilizations pass away, but the gospel goes marching on. The city of Ephesus may not have survived, but the letter to the Ephesians has survived. And it is a letter filled with good news about our identity in Christ and what it means to live out that identity in faithfulness and in the local church.

Paul's letter to the saints in Ephesus contains only 155 verses. You can read it out loud in about twenty minutes. To paraphrase Klyne Snodgrass, "Pound for pound, Ephesians may well be the most influential document in history."¹ The message in this short letter is life-changing.

The Benefits of Studying Ephesians

What makes this little epistle so powerful? Let me mention four points.²

First, Ephesians deepens our understanding of the gospel. Whether you are exploring Christianity, are a new believer, or have been a Christian for years, Ephesians is worthy of your careful consideration, because there is nothing more central to the Christian faith and nothing more vital to growing in the faith than the good news of Jesus Christ. So, dive in and discover more of the "incalculable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8).

Second, Ephesians magnifies the importance of the church, as much as any other New Testament letter. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says some remarkable things about the church that should elevate our concept of the church (See Eph. 1:22-23; 2:11-22; 3:10; 3:20-21; 4:1-16; 5:22-33). This letter shows us what a privilege it is to belong to the church and should inspire us to love and serve our local churches faithfully.

Third, Ephesians may also be the most easily transferrable letter in the New Testament. Ephesians is not the most situational of letters. It is what's often called a "circular letter," distributed and read by the churches in the Asia Minor region and, therefore, comes to us in a more general form than some of the other epistles. Paul does not name specific false teachers; he does not mention specific problems in the church at Ephesus; nor does he include his travel plans as he does in other letters. As a result, Ephesians resonates with contemporary Christians because it seems that Paul could have written the letter to my church and your church.

Finally, Ephesians offers some very practical answers to basic questions about the Christian life. In the first half of the letter, Paul drills down on important doctrinal matters (chapters 1–3), and in the second half of the letter (chapters 4–6), Paul deals more with moral, ethical, and church-focused matters. The first half of the letter speaks to who we are in Christ, and the second half to how we are to live in light of our new Christian identity.

The Author

Paul opens with these words: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will" (Eph. 1:1a). While some argue against Pauline authorship, Paul himself says he is the author (1:1; 3:1). Further, until modern times, Pauline authorship was universally accepted.

Formerly, Paul was a persecutor of the church (Acts 9:1-2), but God transformed him by His grace, and made him His mighty apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 1 Tim. 1:15). Paul's life reminds us that God can radically change anyone.

As "an apostle of Christ Jesus," Paul underlines the fact that his authority came from Jesus Christ. Indeed, we hear the words of Christ when we read Ephesians.

He became an apostle by "God's will." God had a plan for Paul, and it wasn't being an enemy of the church, but a leader in the church (cf. Gal. 1:14-16).

From where is Paul writing? Three times in this letter, Paul mentions imprisonment (3:1; 4:1; 6:20). He may have written this letter near the end of his two-year imprisonment in Rome, about the same time as Colossians and Philemon, approximately AD 62. A lot of the wording in Ephesians appears in Colossians, and it is a good idea to read Colossians as you study Ephesians.

The Recipients

Paul writes “to the faithful saints in Christ Jesus at Ephesus” (Eph. 1:1b). Being a **faithful** Christian in Ephesus and the surrounding regions would not have been easy. Paul experienced a fruitful ministry in Ephesus, but it came with a lot of hardship (cf. 1 Cor. 16:8-9). Paul stayed about three years in Ephesus, the longest stay in his missionary journeys—three months in synagogue, two years in the lecture hall, and “a while” longer (Acts 19:8,10,22). While he had many wonderful opportunities, he experienced a lot of tears and trials (Acts 20:18-19).

There was intense spiritual warfare in Ephesus. The city was known for different forms of paganism. The culture was steeped in materialism, sensuality, superstition, and perverted idolatrous practices. In Acts 19:11-20, we read of spiritual awakening in Ephesus. Many people became Christians, and this dramatic account culminates with the burning of books, which probably contained spells, incantations, and other cultish practices. Later in Acts 19 we read of how Paul’s Ephesian ministry threatened the commerce of those who made silver models of the goddess Artemis (cf. Acts 19:23-41), which stirred up intense opposition from the locals.

Ephesus was also home to the Roman emperor cult. The worship of the emperor was a prominent feature of life at all levels in Asia at this time. Caesar Augustus was spoken of as the “Savior.” On coins, statues, temples, and other items there was the gospel of Augustus, but the church was proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. In this context of spiritual warfare, Paul’s words to the Ephesians includes words like “authorities,” “power,” and “spiritual forces,” and he emphasizes Jesus’s lordship over all.

In the middle of this city were the faithful “**saints**” (Eph. 1:1b). The word saint (1:15,18; 3:8,18; 4:12; 5:3; 6:18) has its roots in the Old Testament, which speaks of God choosing a people from among the nations to be His (Ex. 19:5-6). Christ has made us, as Christians, into a holy people (Eph. 5:26). Positionally, we are holy because we are united with Christ. Now we must live in a manner that is consistent with this position.

These saints included some Jewish believers in Ephesus before Paul’s arrival (Acts 18:24-27), but later it seems that the churches were primarily Gentile. These Christians needed instruction and leadership, especially about unity among Jewish and Gentile believers.

The saints may have lived in Ephesus, but were spiritually located “**in Christ**” (Eph. 1:1b). They lived in union with Christ. Ephesians mentions union with Christ and being “in Christ” more than any other letter, about

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thirty-six times. In Paul's thirteen epistles this occurs some 164 times. This is the heart of Christianity: to be united to Jesus Christ. You are united to His death and His resurrection (2:5-7).

Our identity, therefore, is in Christ, not in our performance, our popularity, our productivity, or our prominence. One of the most common questions during the end of the twentieth century was "Who am I?" This question continues to be a dominant concern in today's society, and the book of Ephesians reminds us that we have an answer to this question. As Christians, we are in Christ Jesus!

The Greeting

Paul writes, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:2). By saying "Grace" Paul is not saying "Hello," but is rather giving a "prayer wish" for grace to come to the Ephesians. The same is true for "peace"—Paul was praying for God to bring peace to his readers. This grace and peace comes from "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." What a magnificent picture of the Father in this letter (see also 1:17; 4:6). There is also a majestic picture of the Lord Jesus as the cosmic King of all. Jesus fills the mind of Paul.

Interestingly, even though the church in Ephesus had an amazing history, with amazing leaders, the final mention in Revelation 2:1-7 about this great church is Jesus saying, "But I have this against you: You have abandoned the love you had at first" (Rev. 2:4). Though they were commended for several things, Jesus pointed out this problem of being the church of cold orthodoxy. As we explore many doctrinal points in Ephesians, may the Lord use it to keep us from this problem, and instead use this study to increase our love for the Lord Jesus.

1. Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians*. The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 17.

2. For a more thorough treatment of the letter to the Ephesians see my commentary, Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*. Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville: B&H, 2014). Excerpts of this commentary are found in this study guide.



WE ARE CHOSEN BY GOD

EPHESIANS 1:3-14

Perhaps you have had a friend or relative that can talk on and on about a particular subject. All you need to do is throw out their favorite topic (e.g., sportscars, NBA basketball, restaurants, great cities, or music) and off they go! They hardly stop to breathe as they give you the facts about corvettes, LeBron James, Thai food, Paris, the best 80s bands, or whatever their thing is.

It is kind of like that with the apostle Paul in various places in the New Testament, only his subject is with the Triune God. We have such a passage here. In Greek, this text (Eph. 1:3-14) is one long, complex, and glorious sentence that oozes with God-centered worship. One writer quipped that this is the “most monstrous sentence conglomeration that I have ever found in the Greek language.”¹ Paul begins blessing God (1:3) and just keeps the praise party going for the rest of the passage!

Made for Praise

This passage is so important because we were made for praise. Humanity has never had a problem with the act of praise; we have had a problem with the object of our praise. In Ephesus, the people had numerous objects of worship, from Diana to the emperor. The question then (and today) is not, “Do I worship?” The question is, “Who do I worship?”

A High-Level View

Unfortunately, this passage has generated a lot of debate because it around controversial topics like election and predestination (Eph. 1:4-5). While it is fine and good to have this discussion, we can miss the spirit of this text if our first instinct is to argue our position with another. The spirit of the text is one of worship. This passage should promote adoration before it sparks argumentation; it is about doxology, not debate.

The note of **praise** is struck in verse 3, and the sentence ends in verse 14 with praise. These bookends help frame the whole passage and show us the emphasis in the text: praise God.

Why worship God? Paul says, because God “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ” (1:3b). The phrase “every spiritual blessing” shows the glorious scope of God’s blessing to His people. In the following verses Paul mentions specific blessing after blessing. The phrase “**in Christ**” will be emphasized throughout the passage, as we cannot enjoy these blessings apart from our union with Christ. The phrase “in Christ” appears eleven times in these verses.

Observe also the **Trinitarian** nature of the passage. The opening verses are Trinitarian; Paul mentions God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and speaks of “every spiritual blessing” (alluding to the work of the Spirit). Further, though the structure should not be forced too woodenly, there is an emphasis on the work of the Father in verses 3-6, the work of the Son in verses 7-12, and then the work of the Spirit in verses 13-14. Paul is calling us to praise the Triune God from whom all blessings flow.

Paul also points out that our salvation is ultimately for **God’s glory**. Look at the phrase “to the praise of his glorious grace” in verse 6 and the phrases “praise to his glory” (1:12) and “praise of his glory” (1:14). Why did God choose to bless us with this great salvation? That He may be glorified. God saves people for His glory.

The passage also highlights the **grace** of God in salvation. Paul speaks of God’s “glorious grace” (1:6) and “the riches of His grace that he richly poured out on us” (1:7-8). Those who have received these riches should praise the giver of them.

Further, these verses highlight the **eternal scope** of salvation. This passage goes from “before the foundation of the world” (1:4) to the completion of the plan to “bring everything together in Christ” (1:10). It goes from eternity to eternity.

Paul speaks of being blessed “in the heavens”—a phrase only used in Ephesians. I think this gets at the **already/not yet** aspect of our salvation. Now we are linked with the heavenly realms because of our relationship with God. We have the benefits of salvation now, but we also anticipate the completion of them in the future.

Finally, note **who** should share in this praise: both **Jew and Gentile**. These spiritual blessings are for all who are in Christ. This passage is about praising the Trinitarian God! Our God is worthy of praise. Why should we praise Him? We have been chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and assured by the Spirit.

Chosen by the Father

EPHESIANS 1:3-6

Paul says that God “chose us” (Eph. 1:4) and that He “predestined us” (1:5). These words scare some people, making them tense up, but they should not. These are Bible words. These words should inspire awe and worship.

The idea of God choosing (electing) a people to display His glory is not new. God chose to create the world for His glory. God chose Abraham to bring blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). God chose the nation of Israel that they might be a light to the nations (Deut. 7:6-8; 14:2; Isa. 42:6-8). Further, Jesus chose His twelve disciples to bear fruit and multiply (John 15:16). Paul adds that God chose what is “insignificant and despised in the world . . . so that no one can boast in his presence” (1 Cor. 1:28a,29). In Ephesians, as in other NT texts (cf. Rom. 9–11; Acts 13:48; Titus 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:10), we read that God chose individuals for salvation. These believers, both Jew and Gentile, make up the church.

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 puts it like this:

Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man, and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God’s sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility.

This is a good summary as it preserves the tension of human responsibility and divine responsibility; it emphasizes the infinite wisdom of God; it highlights the humility this doctrine should create in us.



EVERY SPIRITUAL BLESSING

Being in Christ means you have already been graced by God with a vast array of blessings. Paul refers to every spiritual blessing in Ephesians 1 and outlines some of the most significant for which we should be grateful.

Fill in the blanks to outline these blessings. What words would you add to the list?

C _ _ S _ _ N
 P _ _ D _ _ _ _ _ D
 F _ _ G _ _ _ N
 K _ _ _ L _ _ G _
 I _ _ H _ _ _ T _ _ C _
 S _ _ _ _ D

[Answers: Chosen, predestined, forgiven, knowledge, inheritance, sealed]

Some argue that election here is primarily corporate rather than individual. God did choose a corporate body, but that corporate body is made up of individuals. In fact, the passage speaks about how individuals experience salvation. “Redemption,” “forgiveness,” “sealing,” and “belief” are all individual experiences; so it is not an “either/or” but a “both/and.” God chose a people for Himself, and that people is made up of believing, redeemed, forgiven members.

The Goal of Election: Holiness [1:4]

Paul says God chose us “to be holy and blameless in love before him” (Eph. 1:4). God’s purpose is to bring us into conformity to Jesus (Rom. 8:29-30). In Christ our blame is removed, and His righteousness is given to us. God sees us holy as His Son is holy, if we are in Him. We have that status. This truth is mind-boggling! Now we have the responsibility of pursuing holiness practically—reflecting God’s holiness and love in the way we live.

The Grace of Election: Adoption [1:5]

Paul’s understanding of these doctrines is not mechanical and impersonal, but familial. God purposed to have a family for Himself. He purposed to

adopt us as His children. What a privilege to know God as Father! In these few phrases Paul gives us a mini theology of adoption.

What does it mean to be adopted? It means to have all the rights and privileges that belong to the Father's children. It is also important to bear in mind that adoption has a horizontal aspect, not just a vertical aspect. Not only is God our Father, but we are also now brothers and sisters. The church is a family of adopted brothers and sisters.

The inspired apostle also tells us that our adoption comes "through Jesus Christ." It is only in Christ that we receive these blessings. He goes on to say that God has blessed us "in the Beloved One" (Eph. 1:6). We have been caught up in the love that the Father has for the Son.

And why did God adopt us? Paul says it happened "according to the good pleasure of his will" (1:5). We don't have all the answers to God's ways, but we know that it pleased Him to bring us into the family. He was delighted to adopt us. Verse 6 adds that God did it "to the praise of His glorious grace." Adoption magnifies the greatness of God the Father.

An implication of God's purpose of making us holy and making us His adopted children is that we have been chosen for a mission. God's children will take on the family business, carrying out God's mission. We will imitate God as beloved children (5:1). Being chosen by God is a privilege, but it also contains responsibility for making Christ known in word and deed. My wife and I have adopted five children, now ages 16-21. And our children will tell you that they enjoy the blessings of family, but that they also have chores to do! So it is with the church; we call God "Father," and know one another as "brother and sister," and each of us enjoy the grace of this identity, but also recognize the responsibilities that come with our identity as God's children.

Redeemed by the Son

EPHESIANS 1:7-10

We should also praise God for the work of the Son who redeemed us. Paul overflows with praise to God for His great redemption accomplished through Christ, the forgiveness that is ours because of His death, God's plan to sum all things up in Him, and the rich inheritance that is ours.

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We Have Redemption (1:7-8)

Redemption denotes liberation from bondage or slavery. It reminds us of Israel's salvation from Egypt. Our redemption is spoken of as an event that has already taken place. Paul says, "We have redemption" (1:7).

Paul says that this redemption has come at a great sacrifice: "Through his blood" (1:7). Through Christ's atoning work, we have been liberated from the dominion of darkness (cf. Col. 1:13-14). John later writes that Jesus "loves us and has set us free from our sins by His blood" (Rev. 1:5; see also 1 Cor 6:20; Gal 3:13).

Forgiveness. Paul links redemption to the "forgiveness of our trespasses" (Eph. 1:7). It is only in Christ that we find forgiveness. If He has forgiven our sins, then we should pour out our hearts in adoration to Him. (See Luke 7:36-50.) The Psalmist put it well, "LORD, if you kept a record of our sins, who, O Lord, could ever survive? But you offer forgiveness" (Ps. 130:3-4 NLT). We would have no hope if Christ did not grant us forgiveness . . . but He has. Blessed be His name!

Grace. Paul attributes this act of redemption and forgiveness to the grace of Christ: "According to the riches of his grace that he richly poured out on us with all wisdom and understanding" (Eph. 1:7b-8a). Christians are the recipients of Christ's extravagant grace and kindness. We should never lose the wonder of His grace but fill our minds and hearts afresh everyday with the reminder of what God has done for us in Christ.

Wisdom and Insight. God's grace has also been displayed through the giving of "wisdom and understanding" (1:8a). This grace involves the wisdom to know how to live in light of His redemptive plan (as expressed in the following verses).

We Have Revelation (1:9-10)

Still in the spirit of awe and wonder, Paul says all things will be brought together in Christ. That is, history is going somewhere. History is not a treadmill going nowhere, it's moving toward a particular Christ-exalting goal.

Paul says that God has "made known to us the mystery of his will" (Eph. 1:9). In His grace, God has revealed His eternal plan to us—a plan that centers on Jesus.

What is this plan? It is to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth (1:10). So in addition to the personal aspect of salvation, there is also a cosmic dimension to God's plan of salvation. Paradise was lost in Adam, but it will be restored in Christ when His glory is fully revealed in the future.

Assured by the Spirit

EPHESIANS 1:11-14

On top of all the other blessings already mentioned, Paul now mentions the believer's "**inheritance**" (Eph. 1:11,14; cf. 1 Pet. 1:3-4; Col. 1:12). The Holy Spirit is the guarantee, or "**down payment**" of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14). This too should lead us to praise.

Assured of Our Privileged Status

Again, Paul says that it is in Christ that we have this inheritance (Eph. 1:11). Apart from Jesus, our future is not hopeful; it's terrible. But because of Christ, we are God's possession, and through Christ we have received a glorious inheritance.

How has this happened? How do we have such a status and future? From a divine perspective, it is according to **God's sovereign will**: "Because we were predestined according to the plan of the one who works out everything in agreement with the purpose of his will" (1:11b).

From a human perspective, we have **believed**. Paul emphasizes the importance of personal belief twice: "So that we who had already *put our hope in Christ* might bring praise to his glory" (v. 12a; emphasis added), and "In him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and *when you believed*" (v. 13a; emphasis added). Once again, we see this mystery of sovereignty and responsibility. People receive salvation when they hear the gospel and believe in Christ.

I love how Paul calls the gospel "**the word of truth**." Coming to Jesus for salvation is a coming to the truth. Notice also, the movement from "we" (a reference to Jewish believers in vv. 11-12) to "you also" (a reference to Gentile readers in v. 13) and to "our" inheritance (a reference to both groups equally in v. 14). This anticipates the exposition of how God has reconciled us, Jew and Gentile, through the work of Christ (2:11-22).

What Paul has said in the previous verses is true for Jew and Gentile, but Paul is stressing a different point here in verses 12-13 with the pronoun shift. He is stressing God's sovereign plan in the ordering of salvation history. Paul is also saying that the Lord's inheritance is not limited to the Jewish believers. They obviously had a special privilege as the first to hope in Christ, but the Gentiles are also recipients of God's amazing grace.

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In other words, there are no second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. All believers are God's possession, redeemed for His glory. Gentiles can be assured of their privileged status by the Spirit's work in their lives.

Notice, now, what Paul says about the Spirit's work. He teaches us about the sealing of the Spirit, and the guarantee of the Spirit.

The Sealing of the Spirit

A seal was a mark of ownership and authenticity. Scholars point out that it was used for cattle, even slaves who were branded by their masters. Owners guarded their property from theft by branding them. Those seals were external of course. Our seal is internal (cf. Eph 4:30). God puts His seal in our hearts.²

Paul refers to the Holy Spirit as "promised" probably because his new covenant presence was foretold (e.g., Ezek. 36:27 and Joel 2:28; Acts 2:33; John 14–16). What a privilege to live in the new covenant age and enjoy the assurance of the Spirit, and to be empowered for obedience.

The Guarantee of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our final inheritance. The Spirit is the first installment or the down payment provided for the glory that is to come.

Many times people compare the Spirit to an engagement ring, using this verse. However, an engagement ring is not part of the wedding. It is a promise, but it is not a down payment. A better analogy, as John Stott says, is the down payment on a house, which is the first installment of the purchase. So God is not just telling us about something in the future, He is bringing the future into the present so that we may taste what the future is like.

To the Praise of His Glory

Paul concludes this worship service, striking the familiar line: "to the praise of his glory" (1:14). In light of all that our Triune God has done for us, and in light of all that He has for us in the future, let us join Paul in giving God joyful and humble adoration for the great salvation we have received by grace through faith.



The Library of Celsus in Ephesus was one of the largest libraries in the ancient world.



PRAISE HIM! PRAISE HIM!

Use the space below to write your own prayer of effusive praise for what God has done for you. If you need inspiration to get started, try using the words you identified in the Every Spiritual Blessing activity. Challenge yourself to use them in one, long, run-on sentence.

A CLOSER LOOK

Election

Perhaps some further observations regarding the doctrine of election may be helpful.

First, there is great **mystery** here. This passage addresses God's eternal, secret purposes (Eph. 1:4-5; 10-11). We do well to remember that "the hidden things belong to the Lord our God" (Deut. 29:29). We will never comprehend this mystery fully, and we should discuss it with each other charitably.

Second, while we want to affirm mystery, we should also **affirm the attributes God clearly stated in this text**: God is perfectly loving (Eph. 1:4-5), eternally sovereign (1:5), gloriously gracious (1:6-8), and infinitely wise (1:8). God's act of election is consistent with His character.

Third, even though the passage magnifies God's loving choice, it also shows the necessity of **personal belief** in the gospel. Look at verse 13: one must believe. Remember, this is one sentence. Election and faith belong in the same sentence, and it is a sentence that only God could write. Someone once asked Spurgeon how he reconciled God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, and he responded, "I don't have to reconcile friends!"

Fourth, our election is **in Christ**. We are chosen in the Chosen One. We were not chosen for anything good in us. God accepts us because He chose to put us in union with Christ.

Finally, in light of these things, election should **humble us** (cf. 1 Cor. 1:27-30). Election should never inflate anyone's pride. No one should be cocky when talking about God's grace.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. What does this passage have to say about worship? How does it move you to praise God?
2. Why should we reflect deeply on the doctrine of adoption? What practical benefit might a deep understanding of this doctrine have?
3. How would you explain to a non-Christian what Christ did to accomplish your redemption?
4. How does knowing that God works all things according to the council of His will affect you? Why is it important to reflect on this truth?

1. E. Norden, in O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 90.
2. John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 49.
3. Stott, *Ephesians*, 49.