

FOREWORD BY J. I. PACKER

HOW BEING EMBRACED BY THE LOVE
OF CHRIST CHANGES EVERYTHING

*Alive
in Him*

Gloria Furman

“Paul’s definitive declaration on church life is found in the book of Ephesians—life through, from, in, with, for, and under the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of sinners, the Redeemer, risen, reigning, and returning, now and henceforth forever, by the Father’s appointment, Lord of all. The whole of this comes into focus in Gloria Furman’s applicatory overview of Ephesians, which I enthusiastically commend as vitamin-packed nourishment for Christians everywhere.”

J. I. Packer, Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology,
Regent College

“Some expositions are careful, line-by-line, evenhanded explanations of the biblical text. This exposition is exuberant, irrepressible, and intoxicating. Its strength is that its author, Gloria Furman, has tasted for herself the bliss of being loved by God, and she wants her readers to drink deeply from the same fountain.”

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity
Evangelical Divinity School; Cofounder, The Gospel Coalition

“*Alive in Him* brings together the rich reality of both the transcendence and immanence of life in Christ. The truths found within its pages remind us that relationship must always precede response. But when that relationship is rooted in the ‘riches of his grace,’ that treasure transforms every other relationship.”

Karen Hodge, Coordinator for Women’s Ministry, Presbyterian
Church in America; author, *Transformed: Life-taker to Life-giver*

“This is a wonderfully heartwarming overview of Ephesians that will encourage and inspire even the most weary of saints. Gloria has worked hard to show how Paul’s letter fits into the bigger picture of God’s revelation and writes in a way that makes these foundational truths both accessible and digestible. Each chapter helps us to join the dots of God’s great plan of salvation that is bringing all things together under the lordship of Christ. With well-worked illustrations and realistic applications, this book challenged me again and again to delight in the love of God and its transforming power so that I might become more like Christ and bring him greater glory.”

Carrie Sandom, Director of Women’s Ministry, Proclamation Trust;
Associate Minister for Women, St. John’s, Tunbridge Wells; author,
Different by Design: God’s Blueprint for Men and Women

“Reading *Alive in Him* was like sitting down to a beautiful, soul-nourishing meal, hosted by a good friend. Gloria packs each chapter full of rich truths from Ephesians, and you can’t help but be swept up into her enthusiasm for God’s Word and the gospel story. Gloria is especially skilled at lifting our eyes up from out of the weeds to see the bigger picture: the glorious reality of being ‘alive in Christ’ and what that means to our every day. Accessible, faithful, full of contagious exuberance and joy, and rich with nourishment for your soul, I highly recommend this book.”

Caroline Cobb, singer-songwriter

“*Alive in Him* is engaging, refreshing, and marvelously surefooted. A delightful read!”

J. Gary Millar, author, *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy and Calling on the Name of the Lord*

“In the best possible way, *Alive in Him* is an unusual book. It is not a commentary, atomizing and analyzing each word and verse. It is not asking the reader to pick a side in a contentious current debate. It is not a greeting card-type devotional that reduces the biblical text to pious platitudes. Rather, it is an in-depth reflection on Ephesians that, in style and content, captures Paul’s bounding enthusiasm in that letter for the majesty of Christ and his gospel and asks us to respond in wonder and praise to God.”

Claire Smith, Bible teacher; author, *God’s Good Design: What the Bible Really Says about Men and Women*

“Ephesians 4 tells us, ‘He gave some as teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.’ I am deeply grateful that God gave Gloria Furman to the church. Because geography separates us, I can count on one hand the number of times I have gotten to sit under her teaching in person. Each time I was mesmerized, thoughts whirling, unable to write fast enough. Each time I was challenged, edified, and humbled. This book yielded the same result. *Alive in Him* is a precious chance to sit at Gloria’s feet and hear Ephesians expounded with grace and clarity. Get your pen ready.”

Jen Wilkin, author, *Women of the Word*; Bible study teacher

Alive in Him

Alive in Him

*How Being Embraced by the Love of
Christ Changes Everything*

Gloria Furman

Foreword by J. I. Packer

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For the saints who dwell in these desert
lands and are faithful in Christ Jesus

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Foreword

Out of the blue, by FedEx, came this manuscript, with cover letters from author and publisher, asking me to provide a foreword. The author's name was new to me, but I turned some pages and quickly found myself back in the days when, at the ripe old age of twenty-two, I stood before a class of war veterans, all older and no doubt wiser than me, to prepare them for a denominational exam on Ephesians in Greek, which they had to pass in order to proceed to the pastorate. (Full disclosure: they all made it, I am thankful to say.)

Whence this jolting of memory? Not from any similarity of teaching style. My job was textual, exegetical, and academic, and my way of doing it, as I recall, was phlegmatic and plodding, whereas Gloria Furman is exuberant, flamboyant, and topical, darting to and fro at high speed to make her points. Nor does any matching of resources come into it; I drew, I remember, mainly on Thomas Goodwin the Puritan and a High Church Anglican named Armitage Robinson, but there are no Puritans in Furman's reading list, and the Anglicans there are far from Robinson's type.

What then made my memory bell ring so loudly? It was the perception that digging into Ephesians had thrilled Mrs. Fur-

man's socks off, just as deep down it had done mine two generations ago (and, for the record, still does). Shared enthusiasm was the trigger factor. Paul's concentrated layout in Ephesians of the glory of God's grace—the life-giving, price-paying love of the Father, the life-reshaping mediation of the Son, and the life-transforming ministry of the Holy Spirit—is breathtaking; Gloria Furman feels it, as do I, and evidently we agree that every healthy Christian will feel the same, now and to all eternity.

There is a link of some kind between Ephesians and Colossians. Colossians is often viewed as Ephesians shrunk, but the more natural guess is that Ephesians is Colossians enlarged and generalized into a circular letter that Paul's aide-de-camp Tychicus would take to a group of churches (see Eph. 6:21), leaving a copy with each. Of this group Ephesus was the church that Paul knew best, so it would not be strange if, when Paul's letters were collected, this one would be tagged "To the Ephesians" simply. But be that as it may be, what is certain is that Paul's definitive declaration on church life is found here, just as his definitive declaration on gospel life is found in Romans, with the two together yielding his definitive teaching on Christian life as such—life, that is, through, from, in, with, for, and under the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of sinners, the really real Redeemer, risen, reigning, and returning, now and henceforth forever, by the Father's appointment, Lord of all.

The whole of this comes into focus in Gloria Furman's applicatory overview of Ephesians, and of fellowship with Christ according to Ephesians, which I enthusiastically commend as vitamin-packed nourishment for Christians everywhere.

J. I. Packer

Preface

Do you read other people's mail? If you opened a letter that began, "To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus," you might not think the contents of that letter were for you. Unless, of course, you were a Turkish Christian reading the Bible on your balcony in Ephesus on a warm spring afternoon while you boiled finely ground coffee beans in a *cezve*!

Think of the book you are holding in your hands like one of those Lonely Planet guides that you can buy to prepare for travel abroad. The guidebook itself isn't the experience but something you read to whet your appetite for the real thing. It would be a sad state of affairs to only read about the views from the observation deck of the Burj Khalifa and leave it at that, thinking that you've felt the exhilarating dizziness of standing on the 126th floor of the world's tallest building, with the hot desert air blowing in your face. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is the real deal; my book is a mere bookmark.

Because Ephesians is God's Word, all of it is to be treasured, obeyed, shared, and meditated upon. God's Word is eternal. My little book on the themes of Ephesians is not eternal. If you want to know more about Ephesians but settle for just reading this book, then you will lose out. What you and I both need is

Preface

to feed on God's Word; it's not a mere part of life, but it is our *very* life (Deut. 32:47). My goal is to lead you deeper into the text of the Bible so that you can see for yourself just how wide and long and high and deep is the mind-boggling love of Christ (Eph. 3:18–19). I really hope you'll read *Alive in Him* in the context of community. Because it's based on the text of the Bible, it is best to read, discuss, and apply what you're learning with other people. Plus all of the *you*'s in Ephesians are really plural *y'all*s or *youz* *guyz*!

These themes—the new humanity; Christ the head of all things; seated in heavenly places with Christ; a reordered cosmos; spiritual armor—all have the potential of sounding to rational ears like spiritual delusion or fantasy. To those who are tired of their sin and sick of the revolting evil in the world, what Paul has written sounds too good to be true. Is Jesus just our personal Peter Pan who takes us to Neverland, where we never have to face the facts of life? Is Ephesians describing an imaginary playground where Christians go on a farcical spiritual holiday while real wars rage back in the real world? Or is the picture of reality that we're given in Ephesians the true reality? And is it really as awe-full and terrifyingly beautiful as the letter says it is? Let's pray that God would give us eyes to see.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the men and women who have taught and are teaching me how to read the Bible. These saints spur me on to know what is the hope to which he has called us and have specially shaped the way I approach Paul's letter to the Ephesians: John Piper, Greg Beale, Kevin Vanhoozer, Tony Reinke, Graeme Goldsworthy, Michael Reeves, Elisabeth Elliot, and Timothy Gombis. Their influence is all over the pages of this book.

Ephesians reminds me to praise God for the faithful witness of two young women who winsomely pointed out to a fellow college student the fact of her spiritual deadness. I had no idea that I was dead in the trespasses and sins I was walking in, and when Tiffany James and Tiffany Sumlin shared the gospel with me in a freshman girls' Bible study, I was floored. I'm eternally grateful for these sisters in Christ who patiently explained to me that God is rich in mercy, and because of the great love with which he loved us (even when we were dead in our trespasses!) he made us alive together with Christ. Thank you, God, for the cross. By grace we have been saved!

I consider it one of the greatest privileges of my life to be a member of my local church, Redeemer Church of Dubai. Thank you for reveling in the mystery together with me—that we are

Acknowledgments

members of the same body and partakers of the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel. Every time we gather, it is a profound joy to display the manifold wisdom of God to the world and beyond and to catch a glimpse of the new creation, where people from every tribe and nation worship Jesus together.

Special thanks go to Robert Peterson, Andrew Wolgemuth, and Katlyn Griffin for using their various gifts to equip me to write this book. Thank you to Crossway for leveraging all their resources to spread God's Word to every corner of the globe. I'm so thankful for J. I. Packer's faithful ministry and books and for the generous foreword he contributed for *Alive in Him*. My life has been forever marked by Dr. Packer, particularly through his compelling book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, which taught me with no lack of enthusiasm that "we are all under orders to devote ourselves to spreading the good news, and to use all our ingenuity and enterprise to bring it to the notice of the whole world."¹

A scholar has said that if you understand eschatology, you will undoubtedly enjoy your spouse all the more. (I think he could have been paraphrasing Ephesians.) To my dear husband, Dave, thank you for modeling the Christlike love described and commanded in Ephesians. Your determination to love me in the way that Christ loves his church points me to my Savior.

Thank you to the families and churches who enable us to serve. God uses your support and encouragement to help us put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace as shoes for our feet. We couldn't run with the gospel without you.

And to the sovereign God who made me alive together with Christ and saved me by grace, forever thanks and praise belong to you.

Introduction

What Ephesians Is—and Isn't

Often when we read Ephesians we think of its content in lists: lists of the blessings we have in Christ; lists of who submits to whom in the household; lists of the pieces of our spiritual armor. The lists are there, but there are no bullet points in Ephesians. Instead of reading Ephesians to make lists, we should approach it expecting to see what is there in the context in which it is presented. In its most basic interpretation, the first half of Ephesians describes a narrative picture of what Jesus has accomplished through his cross; the second half of the letter describes how we can walk in the light of that reality.

Our expectations for our study of this letter should be high, and no doubt Ephesians will not disappoint. I haven't read a more effusive description of the letter than this one by pastor and theologian Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

There are statements and passages in this Epistle which really baffle description. The great Apostle piles epithet upon epithet, adjective upon adjective, and still he cannot express

himself adequately. There are passages in [the] first chapter, and others in the third chapter, especially towards its end, where the Apostle is carried out above and beyond himself and loses and abandons himself in a great outburst of worship and praise and thanksgiving. I repeat, therefore, that there is nothing more sublime in the whole range of Scripture than this Epistle to the Ephesians.¹

Nothing more sublime! Ephesians presents the sweeping panorama of history—from before the world began to after God re-creates all things at the end of this age. The stage was set in the mind of God since before time began, and the scenes move quickly. They even jump back and forth in time. Always, though, always running along is the almost slow-motion feeling of being swept up into the starry host to see the new heavens and the new earth being born. By grace we were chosen to participate in the drama. Could there be a greater privilege in all the universe?

Paul is describing the reordering of the cosmos in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Included in the macroscopic vision we see in Ephesians are detailed descriptions of Jesus's renewing and redeeming work. Essentially, we are given a picture of how he has reordered everything so that his will is done on earth as it is in heaven; we see what makes sense in this age now that he is the crucified, risen, ascended, and reigning cosmic Lord. Though we tarry, yet in this fallen world, his kingdom has come, is yet coming, and will imminently arrive in full. This age has been described in the timing of history as the “already but not yet” of Christ's kingdom, which is burgeoning full on the horizon. With faith-eyes enlightened by the Spirit, this is what should hold our heart's gaze when we read Ephesians.

Alive in Him is about what Ephesians is about. It is not a

line-by-line commentary but a thematic treatment of the sublime truths in the letter. We have no need to “make Scripture come alive” when we read Ephesians, because Scripture is already alive (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Ephesians is not a dusty, doctrinal catalogue but a glorious vision pulsating with images of redeemed reality.

The riches of God’s mercy to us in Christ Jesus are headline-making facts in the church. “You were predestined for adoption!” “You are the body of Christ!” “You were saved by grace through faith!” When we understand the implications of these realities, we experience the deepest peace and highest affections for God even though we remain in the body waiting for the Lord’s return. There is a public-witness dimension to our new identity as well. The way we walk either personifies to the watching world what Christ is like (as we are *Christians*), or it shows a distortion of his image in us. Therefore, studying Ephesians and its content is not about making people aware of their blessings for the sake of self-esteem; it’s about the glory of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians describes in broad strokes and detailed lines how being embraced by the love of Christ changes *everything*. Because of Jesus there is a “new creation order” in effect from the highest echelon of the angelic order in heaven to the lowliest invertebrate growing in the deepest part of the deepest ocean. It is fitting that the Creator who made all things would redeem his creation. But what of the rebels, God’s enemies who are loyal to the Devil and the world that is passing away? How can they be redeemed? God’s glory is *the* answer. It is in beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ that we are changed.

That is a message we need to hear over and over again, especially in a world filled with counterfeit gospels that lead to our

temporal disappointment and our eternal destruction. Since the Creator has created us with a capacity for hearing his Word, and he has spoken to us, our entire lives must be consumed with knowing and living his Word. While we tend to treat individual Bible verses like Band-Aids, Scripture testifies of itself that it is actually our very life (Deut. 32:47). The headlining banner over the individual Christian's life and the life of the church is that there is something more satisfying and more enduring than knowing that we are blessed. It is in knowing and being known by the triune God who is blessed forever. We learn about this God in his Word. Ephesians is a call to live according to that reality—walking in the knowledge of God in our daily lives with one another. As we run the race God has marked out before us, we look behind us to see that great cloud of witnesses of those who have finished their race. We also look to the ends of the earth to see our brothers and sisters who are also headed toward that Celestial City. We understand that our life is a vapor, and in understanding the frailty of our lives and the enduring truth of God, we pass down God's Word to the generations who will come after us. The path we trod is narrow, but it is not lonely! Ephesians calls us to walk faithfully with our eyes on eternity as it expands on the horizon and in our hearts.

Ephesians teaches us how to interpret the world around us according to eternal realities. Ephesians also takes us a step further into concrete application. We're shown how to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel we love as our doctrine is embodied in everyday life. I deeply appreciate how Kevin Vanhoozer summarizes the concept of Christian integrity:

It's one thing to have a high view of Scripture; quite another to *do* its truth. It's not enough to admire the Bible; we have to embody it. Being biblical is not simply a matter of believ-

ing its propositions but of responding to the many things God is saying to us in Scripture. Because God *does* do more than convey information to us through the Bible, so those of us who read the Bible have to be more than information processors. A robust view of biblical authority requires us to obey its commands, trust promises, sing its songs, heed its wisdom, and hope for its ending.²

In the course of Ephesians we are given a distinctly Christian worldview that addresses the age-old problem of evil: why do God's children suffer pain and loss if Christ is on the throne? We are comforted regarding the reality of the unseen realm around us: should we be frightened of the powers and authorities if Christ is exalted far above them? The narrow vision we have for our lives is shown on the canvas of eternity. What are we to make of the mundane moments of our days? Do they matter in God's grand scheme of things? Ephesians reminds us how we have "learned Christ," and how his gospel utterly transforms literally everything. No realm is untouched—the life of the mind, our emotions, our families, our jobs, our prayers, our worries—everything is subject to the rule and sway of the will of Jesus. We cannot escape or outrun the future grace we have been given in Christ, and our daily lives are profusely marked by God's love and mercy.

A holy invasion to fill the void in our hearts has been inaugurated through the Spirit, who descends on believers and remains in them. Jesus has bound the strong man and plundered his house, and we are the captives he has released and leads in his train. Jesus is fearlessly and perfectly accomplishing the mission of God to rescue and redeem his children in every corner of the globe. As C. S. Lewis would say, in his world-renowned *Chronicles of Narnia*, "Aslan is on the move."

Blessed in Christ

The Recipients of God's Rich Grace

EPHESIANS 1:1-14

In the cult classic film *Back to the Future*, teenager Marty McFly travels back in time and interacts with people in the 1950s. When Marty begins to understand the potential repercussions of his time travel exploits, he says that it's "heavy." His friend Doc, confused by the colloquial phrase from the future, asks, "Why are things so heavy in the future? Is there a problem with the earth's gravitational pull?" Doc is awestruck by the idea that something as fundamental to life as gravity could be an entirely different experience for people in the future. The irony in the script, of course, is that Doc is also thinking about something that is "heavy."

Whoa—This Is Heavy

There are many passages in the Bible that we tend to think of as too heavy to comprehend. And we would be right! The letter of Paul to the Ephesians is six short chapters, yet its content is loaded down with a weight of glory that boggles the mind and overwhelms the senses. Some people might pick up this heavy passage in the first chapter, skim over it, and walk away unfazed. I've done this myself on occasion, my eyes glossing over the mega-sentence as my mind drifts to wondering what's for supper. But despite our mortal minds and the distractions that surround us on every side, we have every reason to be encouraged as we labor to press into these truths. This is because the heaviness of this massive paragraph is really a weight of glory that we are meant to bear.

Ephesians is heavy, glorious truth—a burden that can be borne only on the back of humility. So it is with prayerful, humble hearts that we open this book together.

Are We Reading Other People's Mail?

Paul opens his letter with a customary, customized introduction. He says that he is “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” If his authority was initially ambiguous to any readers, let all doubts be washed away in this tsunami of commissioning. God himself, the creator and sustainer of the universe, the one who calls himself “I am,” decreed that Paul is an apostle of his one and only Son, who has been given authority over all things. The words in this letter carry with them the authority of the one who sends the message. The sender is God. The words are God's Word. God is exalted in his power; who is a teacher like him? Can he be instructed? God says and does what he pleases; who can question him (Job 36:22–23; Rom. 11:34)?

God invented our human minds by which we peer into the words that have their origin in his mind. When we hold the Bible in our hands, we are holding a book of unfathomable significance and authority because it is God's Word. Our ability to acknowledge this fact is evidence of God's mercy in our lives. Our Creator does not owe us anything; it is benevolence of infinite kindness that God would speak to us and to do so in such a way that we might understand. Living wholeheartedly according to his Word, as we are well aware, requires a powerful work of grace that comes from the almighty God himself.

The phrase in 1:1 that describes the Ephesian Christians as "faithful in Christ Jesus" is startling. Is Paul using flattery to win over his readers by calling them "faithful"? Admittedly, I do this as a mother sometimes, but I like to think of it as something more positive such as vision casting. "Would my helpful children please come set the table for dinner?" I want to summon my youngsters to rise to the occasion and prove their helpfulness. Is Paul trying to cast a vision for the Ephesians to prove they are faithful? No, this is neither empty flattery nor inspiring vision casting. Paul is calling it like it is. If you are "in Christ Jesus," then by definition you are *faithful*. That's why this introduction is startling. If you looked back on the last day of your inner dialogue, spoken (or typed) words to others, emotional leanings, et cetera, you would have a hard time coming to the conclusion that you are the embodiment of godly faithfulness. So we must be reading someone else's mail, right? How does Paul get away with saying that we are faithful? Because we are "in Christ." This little term—*in Christ*—is actually the subject of a host of weighty ideas and expressions that are developed throughout the New Testament. Paul calls Christians those who are "in Christ." This in-ness is a one-ness: because Christ is alive forevermore, so we are alive in him. As you

read Ephesians, keep an eye out for phrases such as “in Christ” and “in the Lord.” Paul will spend the rest of his letter describing what life looks like as a result of being one with Christ—in Christ.

Becoming a Christian is a result of being in Christ. It is not merely our countenance, manners, religious habits, or other externalities that have changed since we were made alive in him. At the moment of our conversion we were altered at the very core of our being. The life of Christ is now in us. Anglican theologian Richard Sibbes put it like this:

Before those opposed to each other can be friends, there must be an alteration; and this alteration must be either on God’s part, or on ours. . . . On a musical instrument, those strings that are out of tune are adjusted to those that are in tune. In the same way, it is we who must alter, and not God.¹

Once we were God’s enemies; we are now reconciled to him through his Son. And it is in his Son where we will remain forever. Paul doesn’t call us “saints” because we are holy people in and of ourselves. He doesn’t call us saints because a religious organization has conferred on us the title. He calls us saints because God has set us apart and placed us in his Son. Our “saintliness” is because of what Christ has done on our behalf. We belong to God as his holy people by his own initiative and Christ’s work on the cross. Ours is to respond in faith to this gospel. Paul’s introductory blessing is apropos, a statement of fact that we mustn’t allow our hearts to miss the thrill of pondering. “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:2).

The Fulfillment of the Sanguine Psalm 103

The blessings we have in Christ are more than social niceties like saying “Gesundheit” after someone sneezes. Paul is describ-

ing how we have been blessed “with every spiritual blessing.” Often, when we hear of these blessings, we just smile and nod and utter a polite “Thanks,” as though someone has just blessed a sneezing fit. “Spiritual blessings” sounds fake, like a warranty for an appliance that expires the moment you open the package and use the machine. That warranty was never meant to benefit you, the consumer. But God’s blessings are utterly real. The indwelling Holy Spirit is the one who mediates these blessings to us; he brings them to us and applies them to our lives. In this section Paul writes to unwrap these blessings in a massive sentence that spreads from verses 3–14 in the original Greek (202 words!).

This lengthy sentence at first seems like a flourish of random ideas, but Paul is actually quite intentional. Have you ever noticed that in all the other major world religions it is polite and common to ask for “God’s” blessings or to say, “Praise God”? Notice in this passage how Paul moves through each person of the Holy Trinity and repeats certain phrases. He notes that God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a notation that highlights this as a *distinctly Christian* composition of praise to God.

This opening passage in Ephesians echoes Psalm 103, where God calls us to trust him as we walk in this fallen world. This psalm anticipates what we have been given through Christ, which is “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3). Bless the Lord, oh my soul! Don’t forget a single one of these blessings! These blessings find their origin in him, and their bestowment upon us is entirely of God’s own initiative. It is he who blessed us, chose us, predestined us, lavished his grace on us, made known his purposes to us, and accomplishes all these things for us. All this he has done “to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved”

(Eph. 1:6). The blessings of Psalm 103, which are specifically fulfilled through Jesus and described in Ephesians 1:3–14, are both wrought of God’s glory in his Son and bestowed through the gleaming mercy shown to us at the cross. God’s saving purposes are from eternity past in the council of the Trinity, and “in all wisdom and insight” (v. 8) he lavishes his grace on all those he chooses.

A Gift for You

In my experience in sharing the gospel, I’ve noticed that most people do not contend with the idea that God is mighty to save and that he indeed retains the prerogative to save sinners (because he is, after all, *God*). What most people do take issue with is his willingness to save them and change them. “Sure, right. I know he can save me. *But would he?*” God’s willingness is called into question, and his willingness is usually evaluated from the vantage point of that person’s fluctuating, circumstantially based emotions. If you struggle with this (I’m raising my hand here too), then watch how the record gets set straight in verses 4–6. It says that we were chosen before the foundation of the world. This is no last-minute grab off the shelf when you reach the cash register.

Our salvation is not the effect of a thoughtless impulse buy, but it is the impulse of the holy, triune God who determined to save us from before the foundation of the world. He chose us not because we were already holy and blameless like he is (we weren’t). Perhaps hearing that your being chosen is not because of your goodness is news to you. You may have been under the impression that God owed it to you to save you because you worked so hard to please him. Many of us may even balk at such an understanding of salvation and think, *I would never believe*

that! I know that salvation is all about grace. Even so, we may still be tempted to live as though God were obligated to bless us because of our goodness. I become aware of this struggle in my own heart any time I suffer a trial and wonder, “Why me?”

Remembering that God chose us to be holy and blameless before him rather than because we were already holy and blameless is a freedom bell in the sinner’s heart. We’re comforted by this doctrine when we’re feeling sheepish and vulnerable. God chose us. Let gospel freedom ring!

The Guiding Thermostat in Paul’s Letter

The oven in our apartment is a mystery to me. The markings on the dials have long been worn off by previous tenants. When the workers come to replace the empty gas tank for the oven, I excuse myself to the living room (as is appropriate culturally). If I bake cupcakes, they might lean to the left or the right indiscriminately. At Thanksgiving time the only sure bet for roasting the turkey properly is a trusty meat thermometer and lots of patience, and an adventurous spirit. I have so many questions about my oven that may never be answered, but I do have tools that can help me begin to understand how to avoid burning pancakes (too badly).

The mysterious passages in Ephesians are like that oven. We tend to examine Ephesians in disjointed sections and walk away with questions such as:

- How do you put on the seemingly out-of-place spiritual armor in chapter 6 (and why)?
- What does a modern man or woman do with the “household code” in chapter 5?
- How can sinners live out the call to holiness in chapter 4?

- Is it possible to see the unity of God's people in chapter 3 even amid our hundreds of denominations?
- How do we live out the ramifications of salvation by grace in chapter 2?
- And who can wrap their mind around the spiritual blessings in chapter 1?

When these issues are considered in isolation, they tend to take on an air of frustrating futility. The cupcakes will always turn out lopsided no matter what I do, so why bother? While this might be an understandable sentiment, don't give up on the cupcakes! They're worth every bit of effort you put into discovering how to see them turn out right-side up. There *is* a guiding thermostat, if you will, in Ephesians. (Please forgive my return to the dessert illustration—I have an incurable sweet tooth.) The overarching message of Ephesians, the fountain from which every doctrinal truth emerges is Ephesians 1:9–10:

. . . making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Let Earth Receive Her King

God is blessed for revealing his mysterious plan from eternity past and bringing it to fruition in eternity future. When we struggle with the question of our purpose and of the purpose of the world, Ephesians 1:9–10 gives us God's comprehensive answer. God is glorified through his "making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

When God created Adam and Eve, he blessed them. Then he

charged them with the privilege of stewardship over his creation. “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). Men and women were to rule justly and mercifully under God’s authority, leading and nurturing all he put in their care. But mankind rejected God’s authority through their sin, and as a result the creation became subjected to futility.

Take a two-second glance at the news headlines for today and you will observe that mankind fails to rule creation with justice and mercy. But the Bible is God’s story of redemption. There will be a Son of Man ruling from the throne. Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28; see also Rev. 3:21). Jesus is the one who rules unequivocally over everything in heaven and on earth. We read in Ephesians 1:9–10 the end goal of all things, the all-encompassing reason for everything that ever was or will be—the *anakephalaiōsis*. That is a deeply profound term that means “summing up.” Although we are only a mere ten verses into Ephesians, this statement is the climax of the entire epistle. Ephesians shows us how Jesus, the Son of Man, has come to his throne. The rest of this letter draws out the implications of Christ’s enthronement. There are implications not only for us as individuals who love the Lord and long for his return when every knee bows to him and every tongue confesses he is Lord, but also for us collectively as members of Christ’s body, the church.

One of those implications is that the summing up of all things in Christ summons forth our authenticity. The world is

all kinds of crazy (again, just skim the newspaper headlines), but a life lived in light of this doctrine is coherent. When we reject or ignore the mystery God has made known (Christ as the focal point of all things), we are out of step with God's purposes for the cosmos. Centered on ourselves, we are cosmic renegades. Centered on Christ, we are utterly authentic in the most genuine sense of the word. The relevancy of the *anakephalaiōsis* to our daily lives (both now and tomorrow and in eternity) is the consistency (or congruence or uniformity or correspondence) of our lives with ultimate reality. It also motivates us to carry the gospel to people groups who have not yet heard of Christ and who are perishing for this lack of knowledge.

This consistency of our lives in accordance with this truth is no mere rote submission but rather adoring love with corresponding speech overflowing from *hearts* filled to overflowing with sincere fealty and love for Christ our head. It is sober *minds* that think thoughts that are in line with God's truth and are confident in the sufficiency, authority, and clarity of his Word. It is *doing* all things as service rendered unto the Lord by his strength that God supplies for Christ's glory—that he might be glorified in all things. A Monday morning at the office lived in line with the summing up of all things in Christ is a depiction of utter authenticity. The resolution of a conflict over even the dumbest of things (as many conflicts often are), when done in accordance with the supremacy of Christ, is evidence of Christ's loving rule. We are doomed to live a confusing and false existence as long as we live in denial of the universal headship of Jesus. But when we humbly repent of the notion that we can live independently from God and instead cling to Jesus, then we walk in truth.

We'll explore more implications of this later on in the chap-

ter and throughout the book. For now, I want to discuss a few key phrases in the mega-sentence of verses 3–14.

What Is Predestination?

First, we'll come to the oft-misunderstood term *predestination*. It ought to be mentioned that predestination is not about God collecting humans because he thinks they make nice robots to fill his heavenly warehouses. Far from it! The biblical picture of predestination describes the intentions of a loving Father who predestined us for adoption as sons because he wanted to (“according to the purpose of his will”) so that his grace would be enjoyed and magnified. Jesus said, “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” (John 14:2). This is the picture of genuine adoption of full sons and daughters, not the collecting of robots for manipulation.

The “p-word” also raises other questions—thoughtful questions about those who are not chosen, unreached people groups, unborn children, and many other heart-stirring questions. One thing that we can assuredly affirm across the board (no matter where you land in the complexity of things regarding predestination) is that God is God. God is the one in charge, and he has chosen to save us to this tune—“to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:6). Whereas in the Old Testament God chose Israel to be a people holy to the Lord out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth, it was not for any reason other than the one God himself gave. He chose them because he set his love on them (Deut. 7:6–8). And now, as it says in this passage in Ephesians, God chooses to set his affection on us—those who are in Christ—personally, individually, and irrevocably.

Our chosenness is what sets us apart, and our being in

Christ is what enables us to walk in his ways. The church, as Peter explains, is “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.” And all of this so that we may “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). The church is the embodiment of God’s new creation on earth, ever-increasing and expanding to fill the earth with the knowledge of the Lord by making disciples of all nations, obeying God’s creation mandate and his Son’s Great Commission. Who is sufficient for these things? God has done all this for the sake of the Beloved, his Son, whom he loves. All praise belongs to the God who is both able and willing to save.

When Jesus Cleans House

What does it mean to be “sealed by the Holy Spirit?” Have you ever wondered why Jesus told his disciples before he ascended that it would be better for them if he went away? This passage really puzzled me as a new believer. In the years since then, I’ve grown to appreciate and better understand the doctrine of the indwelling Spirit of God. The reason Jesus says this is that he (together with the Father) is going to send the Holy Spirit to live *in* his followers. He is the blessing by which we receive all the spiritual blessings Ephesians 1 is talking about.

In his Farewell Discourse before he ascended back into heaven, Jesus blessed his disciples and promised that he will send another *Paraclete* (John 14:16). This benediction before his ascension was surprising, though, given the fact of his imminent departure. But his ascension actually provides the avenue by which we are able to be connected forever to the ascended Christ. When he returns to heaven, Jesus sends his

Spirit, who descends upon and dwells in all his disciples in every place. Paul says in 1:13–14 that we “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”

When you were growing up, your mom may have encouraged you to clean your room, saying, “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” In the time since, you may have learned the axiom that literal, physical cleanliness—like dust-free baseboards and mildew-less grout—is *not* a credit to your personal holiness. For example, it is possible for a housewife to clean her house so perfectly that guests could eat off the floor although she is a desperately depraved housewife who is far from God.

It is soul-liberating news that unsoiled bathroom floors are not a requirement for fellowship with a holy God. Yet in a very real sense, *spiritual* cleanliness *is* godliness. I began to appreciate aspects of that particular kind of cleanliness when reflecting on the testimonies of believers in Christ who had been previously influenced or possessed by unclean spirits. Dead in their trespasses and submitted to the wills of unclean spirits, these men and women behaved in accordance with the unclean, ungodly character of the spirit that occupied their “house.”

What does this anecdote have to do with believers being “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit?” If you spoke to these men and women, you would hear them testify to the lordship of Christ over every dark power as he “cleaned house” and sent the Spirit of truth to indwell them and seal them forever. Indeed, whether we have a similar testimony or not, *all* those who are not in the flesh but in the Spirit ought to praise the Father and the Son for sending the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit can never be served an eviction notice. Not ever. Contrary to unclean spirits, the Holy Spirit’s fruit is

godly: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). That’s why Christians are instructed to “walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16), and not to “grieve” (Eph. 4:30) or “quench” (1 Thess. 5:19) the Spirit. The presence of the indwelling, sealing Spirit is a testament to God’s comprehensive, unmitigated ownership over us; he doesn’t merely pay rent. “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19–20). What a thrill and a wonder it is to have been given God’s Spirit! And what an assurance and assurer he is of God’s love as he occupies our hearts.

In his book *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, John Owen said this of the Spirit’s dwelling in our hearts and the consequential yearning for holiness that he produces in us:

Among those who walk with God, there is no greater motive and incentive unto universal holiness, and the preserving of their hearts and spirits in all purity and cleanness than this: That the blessed Spirit, who has undertaken to dwell in them, is continually considering what they give entertainment in their hearts unto, and rejoices when his temple is kept undefiled.²

The Spirit is repulsed by something that is more despicable than filth and more deadly than rogue germs; he hates sin. Cleansed by the blood of the Son and enabled by the Spirit, who desires to please the Father in everything, we can make war against our sin and put to death the deeds of the flesh. We’ll discuss this more as we continue our reading in Ephesians.

And That's Not All!

Our heavenly Father has set aside a place for us in his new heaven and new earth, which is an inheritance unlike any this world has ever seen. For a description of this inheritance see Revelation 21:1–22:5.³ Dual realities are in play here: we have both obtained our inheritance (1:11) and wait to acquire it (1:14). The new heaven and the new earth are ours through Christ. The evidence of this is that we have been sealed in the resurrected Christ by means of the Spirit. Our participation in resurrection began when we were born again. “That is, the Spirit himself is viewed as the very beginning of this inheritance and not just a guarantee of the promise of its coming. The Spirit, who would be present fully throughout the future new cosmos, has entered in part into believers, so that they have begun to obtain the inheritance of the new earth.”⁴

And through Jesus, who accomplished for us a “new exodus” out of our slavery to sin, we have become *God’s* inheritance. “But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day” (Deut. 4:20).

We are his inheritance, we have obtained an inheritance, and we are yet waiting for our inheritance. The dynamic of this “already–not yet” is manifest in our lives every day. “Paul’s emphasis on God’s past act of raising Christ from the dead and exalting him at his right hand in the heavenly places reveals the emphasis in Ephesians on the eschatological ‘already.’”⁵ We have already been given the Spirit and have been adopted, *and* we who have “the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23). And so we are “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing

everything” (2 Cor. 6:10). We are given strength of heart to acknowledge the truth of the depravity of the world we live in, but we grieve with hope (1 Thess. 4:13). Being indwelt by the Holy Spirit “on this side of eternity” is not the end of the story for us. God has “put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee” (2 Cor. 1:22). The gift of the indwelling Spirit is a foretaste of what is to come.

We do not yet possess our inheritance, but the presence of the Spirit in us is a guarantee from God that we will surely possess it. There is no greater assurance we could have. Though we live in this broken and fragmented cosmos, we see with faith-eyes that in the fullness of time there will be a day in which all things will be united under the sovereign rule of Christ (Eph. 1:9–10).

Reminded of Whose We Are

Ephesians reminds us of reality. We are in Christ and we have been given the mind of Christ. Using the mind of Christ, we imagine ways that we might more fully enjoy Jesus and invite others to do the same.

I think that one of the best ways I have been reminded of this fact recently is through the cheerful antics of my young children, who constantly seek my attention so that I can share in their joy. “Look at me, Mommy! I’m a flying super guy,” my preschool-aged son cries out as he leaps off of furniture. My quiet artist brings me pictures she has drawn, and she lingers at my side, watching my face as I behold what she has created. I ask her, “Will you tell me about this right here?” as I point out a detail in her work. She erupts into giggles, and a stream of glee comes out as she describes what she has drawn with flourish. Even as babies they are on to the secret of fulfilling the joy of others. As my youngest was learning to walk, he would squawk

like a parrot until he was certain that he had my undivided attention as he held onto the bedside with one arm, waving the other like a wing getting ready for takeoff. My oldest child writes me letters filled with whimsy that she knows will make me smile. We were made to live in such a way that our deepest joy is found in seeking the joy of others. When the light of the gospel shines in our hearts, it is clear as day that the joy we are seeking is found in Christ, and we long to spend our lives introducing this joy to others, thus increasing our own joy in him evermore. Fueled by the love of Christ, our joy-seeking is purified and ever-expanding.

Understanding that being “in Christ” is our primary location, we live out who we are *in him*. Being embraced by the love of Christ changes everything as he transforms the way we live out the callings he has given us. How does being in Christ transform the way we do our jobs, the way we relate to other drivers on the road, the way we buy groceries, the way we speak to children, the way we think about growing older, and the way we steward our God-given talents? The immortality of Jesus and his indomitable power toward those he loves means that we have at our disposal every spiritual blessing in order to do his will for the fame of his name in all the earth.

Through Christ’s power, we can live “to the praise of God’s glory.” The blessings we have been given in Christ are not carrots being dangled in front of us to reward our potential faithfulness; they are true gifts. Already ours in Christ! Because Jesus is the risen and ascended one who has sent us his Spirit, we don’t have to hope that we will one day be given these gifts. God has graciously given us these transforming gifts to have and to live by faith, believing that they are ours in Christ. We have no need to live irrationally anymore, in ways that contradict the fact that

we have these blessings in Christ. Through Christ's power we can live consistently according to *whose* we are.

Reminded of Our Mission

Who wants to embody the image of created things when we have been captivated by the love of Christ and empowered by his Spirit to be ministers of reconciliation? The mercy of God is currently being extended to everyone. The new humanity in Christ, recipients of God's rich mercy, is designed to be outward focused in extending God's mercy to the lost. But many of us regret that this missional lifestyle of invitation is a fleeting pursuit at times. We have those occasional "aha" moments when we remember the joy of our salvation and cannot help but be inclined to invite others to share in that joy. How many times have I proverbially kicked myself for being so self-centered that I've missed open doors to witness to the grace and mercy of Jesus on the cross to nonbelievers in my life? Being embraced by the love of Christ, and leaning in to the design God has for me as his ambassador, reframes the way I think about myself in relation to others.

As a member of the church, I remember that I have been given the ministry of reconciliation as God's ambassador to the nations. I'm part of the new humanity who blesses this cursed world. We lay down our artillery and lead the charge to use our God-given talents to build up others. We call off all social embargoes and step into diverse relationships in order that we may share the grace God has provided. We tear down our silos of personal and communal isolation to make room for the ever-expanding throng of festal revelers who are entering the kingdom of God. You can't bar the doors when you're waving a palm branch.

The Father is shaping me into the cruciform image of his

Son. Being reminded of this through these passages in Ephesians shows me that this is the primary reality in which I am living, and the reality into which I am inviting others. We have many more things to discuss regarding this particular implication of being “in Christ.” We will do so in later chapters that deal specifically with community and the church.

Reminded to Live Authentically

The escapades that I imagine in my mind, where everyone stops what they are doing to spend energy adoring me, are a farce. There is no other god besides the Lord God. All pretenders are really just dumb and mute idols. This means that the idealized version of myself that I carry around in my heart—the me who everyone fawns over—is really just a shell of a human being drunk on the praise of man. All my plotting to this end is in vain. Even when I succeed at some level and earn some recognition that I’ve been working for (or get lucky and “the gods smile upon me”), I know in my heart that it’s all just rubbish. It doesn’t make me as happy as I can possibly be, and the buzz of the accolades certainly doesn’t last as long as I want it to. The depth and quality of this kind of happiness is always found wanting. But having the mind of Christ reminds you that there is nothing greater than Jesus. The Holy Spirit will not allow you to live satisfied on the rubbish heap; he will nurture a longing for the City of God to beat in your heart.

When we imagine what it means to “live fully as God created you to be,” this often comes with a host of earthly identities. We think of ourselves as embodying a kind of earthly role or brand. “*I’m going to have the smartest children at this school, and their success is going to bring me the admiration I desire.*” “*I’m going to build the most enviable portfolio in my group of friends and*

they are going to seek out my opinions.” “My body is going to look just like hers, and I’m going to enjoy all the benefits that come along with it.” “My house is going to be the sanctuary of all sanctuaries, and it is going to give me the peace that I crave.” “My dining table and stomach are going to be filled with this kind of food, and then I’ll be able to look at myself in the mirror and be proud.” The identity issue transcends stage of life, culture, gender, and economics. Not a single one of us is immune to the messages the world would like us to believe about ourselves. Messages are everywhere—we receive rapid-fire messages via television commercials, advertisements on social media, viral videos, and the like. We also actively *look for* things to attach to ourselves that bring us meaning and identity.

The world invites us to embody its image, buying and selling the lie that if you eat the fruit of knowledge apart from God, deciding what is good and evil, you will be gods. But our consciences, on which God has written eternity, know better. Hence the snide sarcasm of movements that scorn overt brands, ironically becoming earthly brands in themselves. Reflecting the glory of the world is not glorious; it is a slavish hell.

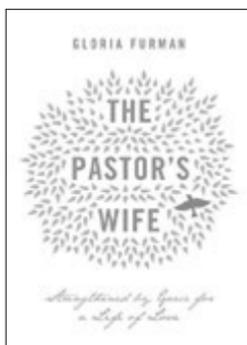
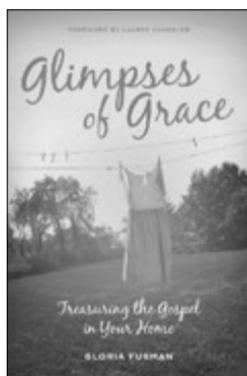
These truths in Ephesians remind us that we have been co-crucified and co-risen together with Christ, and we are to live accordingly, with our affections following suit. Jesus is the one who is worthy of all praise, and he is exalted above all. The only way that we can feel the rush of a life well-lived and rest easy in our soul is by living to revel in and reflect his image.

The Narrative That Eats All Other Narratives for Lunch

The life we long for is not the self-seeking life that the world in its perverse drama seeks to suck us into. The Christian faith offers the one authentic reality. In all our talk about compet-

ing stories—my story, your story, find your story, et cetera—we need biblical truth to clear the stage. Justin Taylor pointed out Michael Horton’s helpful explanation of the one reality: the “counterdrama to all of the meganarratives and metanarratives of this passing age.”⁶ The life we long for is actually the one that gladly raises its glass at every occasion of weeping, laughing, working, defending, building, submitting, leading, serving, marrying, eating, and dying to humbly affirm that all things are “to the praise of *his* glory.”

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