The church is beyond steeples, sermons, and Sundays.
the church

is ________

beyond STEEPLES, SERMONS, AND SUNDAYS
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Welcome

I am thrilled that you have chosen to participate in this journey through Lent with others from the Bel Air Church family. My hope and prayer is that this life group experience, coupled with the sermon series, will provide a tangible environment for you to grow in following Jesus every day, and everywhere, with everyone.

One way to focus on your spiritual growth in this season is to remember that you have the gift of being able to access to God through Jesus at every moment throughout your week. You don't need to wait until you get to the group discussion nor do you need to wait for the next sermon to grow.

**You can be with God every moment of every day.**

One of the ways that I have been proactively “being with God” throughout my week, whether in the midst of the activity of my day or in the midst of the stillness when I am alone, is a simple set of questions that I ask God. These questions immediately acknowledge God as the teacher and leader and it forces me to be still, to listen, to reflect, and to be open to God’s leading. The questions are:

“God, what do you want me to **learn**?”
“God, who do you long for me to **be**?”
“God, what do you want me to **do**?”

You’ll find a version of these questions in this study guide. Try practicing asking God these questions prayerfully together as a group and individually in your mind as you are together. The more you practice these together, the more that you can practice these questions on your own throughout the week.

The goal at the end of the seven week journey would be to have “been with God” throughout the week individually so that you can “be with God” together when you gather.

I invite you to experience the journey of Holy Week alongside your church family by visiting belairpres.org/lent.

Excited for the season ahead as we follow Jesus together!

Rev. Dr. Drew Sams
Senior Pastor and Head of Staff
About This Study

“Church is a staging ground for what takes place between heaven and earth.”– Eugene Peterson

What is the church? We all have answers to that question based on our own experiences, whether raised in the church or not. In the next seven weeks we’ll be reading, thinking, and talking about the church together. How are Scripture’s answers different from ours, and how might we be shaped by them?

We’ll start with a look at the beginning of the church in Acts and then move into Ephesians to look at several of the rich and challenging metaphors Paul uses for the church in his letter.

Weeks 2–7 include a “home study” portion for you to complete each week before your group meets. If you were unable to complete it during a busy week, don’t worry—the group discussion will still be accessible whether you completed the home study or not. Each week’s home study also includes an excerpt from one of Paul’s prayers in Ephesians. It is our hope that everyone who is part of this study will pray these same prayers for our church.

This study was, in part, inspired by Eugene Peterson’s fantastic book, Practice Resurrection. Not only will you will see quotes from the book within each weekly study, but we also highly recommend reading this book for further exploration on the topic of maturing in your faith in community!

Finally, know that we are praying for you and your group. We pray that this study will be a catalyst for growth in your life, and that Bel Air Church will grow and thrive because of your presence and participation.

Grace and peace,

Mandy Fowler
Associate Director of Life Groups
The Church Is Born.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Open with a word of prayer by asking God to specifically reveal to each person these three things: what God wants you to LEARN from this, who God longs for you to BE in light of this, and what God is calling you to DO in response to this. Invite the Spirit to move in your hearts and minds during this time together.

Read the following Scripture passages out loud:

MATTHEW 1:18–20

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

ACTS 2:1–12

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.
6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”
Acts 2:42–47

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

“How did God bring our salvation community into the world, into our history? Pretty much the same way He brought our Savior into the world. … God gave us the miracle of congregation the same way He gave us the miracle of Jesus, by the Descent of the Dove. It was a miracle that didn't look like a miracle, a miracle in the form of the powerless, the vulnerable, the unimportant—not so very different from any random congregation we might look up in the yellow pages …”

— Eugene Peterson, Practice Resurrection (p. 25)

In Mary and Joseph, God used ordinary, unlikely people to birth Jesus into the world. In Acts 2, we read that God chose ordinary, unlikely people to birth the church into the world as well! In fact, the whole Bible is full of stories of God using the unlikely to accomplish His purposes. We don’t have a God who stays distant and remote; He enters our world quietly but powerfully and works through the most unexpected people and in the most surprising ways.

You don’t have to be in a church to be a Christian. But as we explore what Paul says about the church in the book of Ephesians, we’ll see that we do need to be part of a church to mature as Christians. We don’t have a faith that can be practiced in a vacuum. Our communal, Triune God raised up in Israel a people for Himself that He could be in relationship with, so that through them He could bless the whole world through the person of Jesus. This is not a God who intended us to be “Lone Ranger” Christians. He always meant for us to be with others, to practice following Christ with one another and to navigate the difficult journey of life with our spiritual family—the church.

Have you ever heard the saying, “Friends are the family we choose for ourselves?” In some ways church is the opposite: “Church is the family we would never choose for ourselves.” If we had our way, we would surround ourselves with people who have the same interests and concerns and life challenges, people we admire, people in the same “age and stage” as us. And we would completely miss out on the sometimes messy, yet beautiful experience of what happens when people with nothing in common—other than their love for Christ—come together in community.

1 See Genesis 12.
We witness this miracle in Acts 2, where the Holy Spirit united people from vastly different cultures, social classes, and ages, and formed them into the first church.

CONVERSATION TIME

1. Acts 2:42–47 talks about the practices of the first church—how they were together, how they practiced following Jesus as a community. In what ways is our church most similar to this description? In what ways are we least similar?

2. Share words to fill in the blank: The church is __________. (You can answer with nouns, adjectives, etc. There’s no right or wrong answer—this is just sharing your own experience!)

3. Has church been important to you in the past? Why or why not? Is church important to you today? Why or why not?

4. Have you ever walked away from the church, or thought about walking away from the church? What brought you back, or what keeps you?

QUESTIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

Take a few minutes in silence to be with God; ask God these three questions. Spend time in prayer and then, if you feel comfortable, share your answers with the group.

• God, what do you want me to learn from the study, sermon, or conversation?

• God, who do you long for me to be in light of this truth?

• God, what are you calling me to do in response?

PRAY TOGETHER

Pray for any specific needs within the group. Pray for each of us, that over the next several weeks we might all look closely at what church is and what God is calling us into together. Pray that the Spirit would be working in and through this study to strengthen our faith community, to help us find unity and purpose, and to knit us together more closely.
The Church Is Christ’s Body.

HOME STUDY
Complete this part of the study at home before your group meeting.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12–20

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as He chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

JOHN 20:24–29

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in His hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in His side, I will not believe.”

26 A week later His disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 27 Then He said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” 28 Thomas answered Him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”
Paul refers to the church as Christ’s body numerous times in His letters.² It is a profound metaphor for the worshiping community, layered with meaning regarding how we look at ourselves, how we relate to each other, and our collective relationship with God.

When we talk about the church as a body, we usually talk a lot about the role that each of us has to play in it: how everyone is different, how no one part is more important than the other, how we all need to be functioning together to work. These are true and vital conversations for us to have! But take a moment to think about the human body itself: there are all manner of ailments and diseases and injuries that can happen to it, right? If you’re in the medical profession, or even if you’ve ever had the bad idea to search WebMD to diagnose your own mysterious aches and pains, you know there are countless ways our bodies can be unhealthy. In fact, our own bodies are almost never 100% healthy, even on the best days. There’s always a bruise, a paper cut, a sore muscle, or a headache to deal with.

In light of these realities, you might notice that Paul never says that the church is—or that it should be—the perfect, unblemished body of Christ. If you know even a little bit about church history, you know that the church has more often than not resembled something more like the body of an arthritic leper with pneumonia than that of an Olympic athlete. Have we ever been a perfect, flawless, completely healthy body at any point in the history of the church? We could point back to the early church of Acts 2—“The believers were all together and had everything in common…” But if you’ve read any of Paul’s letters to various early churches you know that health didn’t last long: these were sick bodies. Galatians, Colossians, Corinthians, Philippians, Thessalonians… in each of them, Paul is writing about something bad happening that needs fixing!

In fact, Ephesians is the only letter we have of Paul’s where he’s not writing to correct a specific issue. Reading his other letters is a bit like reading a WebMD for what can go wrong in the church. It’s messy. It’s ugly. Sometimes it’s smelly and gross. Our churches today are no different, and we need to be looking to God for the cure for those ailments, exposing those festering wounds to the light and inviting the Great Physician in to heal them. That is part of the work of the church. It is the wounded helping the wounded, not the perfect helping the wounded!

In many ways, the body of the church most resembles the nail-scarred body of the risen Christ. Thomas only believed Jesus was risen from the dead because he was able to see and touch Christ’s wounds. Perhaps we are called to be the wounded body, not a perfect one, because in seeing and touching our scars the world might recognize both themselves and Christ. It is a careful balance: on one hand, we are striving toward

² See 1 Corinthians 12:1–27; Colossians 1:18, 24; Ephesians 5:29–30.
healing and wholeness, both individually and as a community. And on the other, we acknowledge that we will never be perfectly healed and whole this side of eternity, and so we must not hide our wounds. We must give them air and sunshine, not just so they can heal, but so the world feels like it can approach us. Just as Thomas needed to see the scars of Christ, so the world needs to see that we aren’t perfect, but in the process of being healed.

REFLECTION

1. Think about the times you have been wounded by the church, whether ours or another. Have those wounds been healed, or are they still festering?

2. Is there dysfunction you are currently aware of in our church? Take some time to pray for it, and ask for discernment and wisdom in figuring out your place in it. Are you being called to help heal it?

3. Do you feel like you are a part of the body at Bel Air? If not, you are taking a good step by joining a life group for Lent! Pray and think about further steps you might take toward becoming connected; or, if you do feel like you’re a part of the body, pray and think about how you might help others who do not.

PRAYING FOR THE CHURCH WITH PAUL

15 Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, 16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. 17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better.
(Ephesians 1:15–17) NIV
The Church Is Christ’s Body.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Open with a word of prayer by asking God to specifically reveal to each person these three things: what God wants you to learn from this, who God longs for you to be in light of this, and what God is calling you to do in response to this. Invite the Spirit to move in your hearts and minds during this time together.

Read the following Scripture passages out loud:

**EPHESIANS 1:20–23**

20 God put this power to work in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. 22 And He has put all things under His feet and has made Him the head over all things for the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

**EPHESIANS 4:11–16**

11 The gifts He gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. 14 We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. 15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

“Romantic, crusader, and consumer representations of the church get in the way of recognizing the church for what it actually is. If we permit—or worse, promote—dreamy or deceptive distortions of the Holy Spirit creation, we interfere with participation in the real thing. The church we want becomes the enemy of the church we have.”

– Eugene Peterson, Practice Resurrection (p. 28)

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3 Paul “…names us saints—not because we are so wonderful but because he sees us truly as ever and always in the company of the Holy Trinity: holy men, holy women, holy children…” Eugene Peterson, Practice Resurrection: a conversation on growing up in Christ, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 79.
If you've been attending church, whether this one or another, for any length of time, chances are you also have been disappointed or hurt in some way by the church. These injuries and disappointments can be more painful than others because we have higher expectations for people who claim to follow Christ. Since we believe that Christ transforms us, (and that we as believers are dwellings of the Holy Spirit who are in the process of being made more and more into the image of Christ), it seems like the church would have it a little more together, doesn't it? And yet Christ Himself says, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2:17) We are all broken and we are all in process; we are all “grow[ing] up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ …” (Ephesians 4:15)

Maturing in Christ is the work of a lifetime; none of us have “arrived.” As a community, we are being challenged to show continual grace for one another as we undergo the life-long work of being transformed, even as we are also calling each other into ever-deeper maturity in Christ. In this way, we can together be a church who is both open about our failures and yet working together to function as Christ’s body.

There’s no doubt about it: this is a tall order. How do we foster graceful and realistic expectations for the body of Christ while also encouraging healthy growth and Christ-maturity? In Ephesians 4:11–16, Paul mentions speaking the truth in love as we grow, so that we can grow, and goes on to say that the body grows as we build it up in love. If we don’t love the body, it will never be healthy and it will never grow. Love for each other is essential, then, if we are to walk in both grace and maturity. Do we love each other?

CONVERSATION TIME

1. Reread Eugene Peterson’s quote on the previous page and discuss your thoughts about it.

2. When Paul wrote these words in Ephesians about the church as a body, he surely had no idea of the roller coaster path the church would take over the next two thousand years. Today we have many options of places we might call our church home, and often our choice to stay or go depends on things like worship style, preaching style, and programs offered. What might Paul have to say to the church as a whole today?

3. People—not just Christians, but nonbelievers as well—tend to have high expectations for the church. Talk about those expectations—where do they come from? Why does the church so often fall short of them? Is the solution simply lowering our expectations, or something else?
4. This week’s home study talked about the careful balance involved in keeping a realistic picture of the church: as a body that will always have scars and warts and ailments that we bear openly, while also always seeking to find those places where the body isn’t functioning properly and help to heal it. In your experience, do we tend to hide our warts and wounds from each other, or are we comfortable enough to show them? Where are places that our body isn’t functioning well and needs healing to do so?

QUESTIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

*Take a few minutes in silence to be with God; ask God these three questions. Spend time in prayer and then, if you feel comfortable, share your answers with the group.*

- God, what do you want me to **learn** from the study, sermon, or conversation?
- God, who do you long for me to **be** in light of this truth?
- God, what are you calling me to **do** in response?

PRAY TOGETHER

Pray for any specific needs within the group. Pray for each other, that we can treat each other with grace and love while also encouraging one another to grow up in Christ. Pray that as a church we can be a thriving body with our scars out in the open and also seek healing in the places we are dysfunctional.
The Church Is God’s New Humanity.

HOME STUDY

Complete this part of the study at home before your group meeting.

EPHESIANS 2:13–16

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He is our peace; in His flesh He has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, 4 that is, the hostility between us. 15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

STUDY

There are many factors that keep people segregated in church congregations, particularly in a larger church. Older and younger people may not mix very often; parents and married couples are separate from singles and the children and teenagers often have their own church services. Still, it’s hard for us to even begin to imagine the kind of difficulties the early church faced in overcoming the separation within their congregations: Jewish Christian versus non-Jewish (Gentile) Christian. The cultural barriers were very distinct and it was quite a serious issue for the church at the time. Paul addresses these barriers here in Ephesians, as well as in letters to other churches.

The first barrier for the Jewish Christians was perhaps the most difficult one to overcome. The people of Israel—whom God had set apart, made covenants with, and pursued throughout the events recorded in the Old Testament and the thousands of years it spans—understood their identity as God’s chosen people.

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4The “dividing wall” refers to the literal wall around the temple that kept the Gentiles from approaching the temple; signs were posted threatening “foreigners” with death if they disobeyed and tried to enter the temple. (John R.W. Stott, The Message of Ephesians (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 91–92.)
God even described them as His “treasured possession among all peoples.” Now, that whole identity was being threatened by this new revelation—God intended to save not just His chosen people but everyone; in Ephesus, this would have included the Greek worshipers of Artemis and practitioners of magic, all of whom had just committed their lives to Christ.

Another difficult barrier was the customs that had previously set Jews apart from their pagan neighbors: observance of the Sabbath, food and purity laws, and circumcision. Should these new Gentile additions to the family of God observe these as well? What should be kept and what should be left behind? What did this new covenant require of the community? And how do you go from considering someone to be an “unclean pagan” one day and the next be asked to share a table and a meal with them? These are all issues the early church wrestled with!

So it is into this setting that Paul writes the passage you just read. Read it again with the knowledge of these two groups of people—so different in so many ways—in mind: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in His flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility.”

REFLECTION

1. Consider the barriers the early church faced in finding unity and common ground. What parallels do we have in the church today?

2. If God can unite these two totally different groups of Jewish and Gentile Christians into one, He can unite anyone! Take a moment to pray for the unity of our church.

3. How might you participate in the work of breaking down any of the “dividing walls” in our church? Are there any tangible steps that come to mind?

PRAYING FOR THE CHURCH WITH PAUL

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17–19) NIV

5 Exodus 19:5–6.
The Church Is God’s New Humanity.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Open with a word of prayer by asking God to specifically reveal to each person these three things: what God wants you to learn from this, who God longs for you to be in light of this, and what God is calling you to do in response to this. Invite the Spirit to move in your hearts and minds during this time together.

Read the following Scripture passages out loud:

EPHESIANS 2:11–16

11 So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— 12 remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 7 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He is our peace; in His flesh He has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

6 “Gentiles are called by the name “the uncircumcision,” which for a Jew often announced the inferiority or even shame of those so branded.” Andrew T. Lincoln, “Ephesians.” Word Biblical Commentary. (Dallas: Word Books, 1990),135.

7 In verse 12, Paul says that the non-Jewish Christians (Gentiles) were previously “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel.” This implies that, thanks to their adoption into the family of God via their trust in Christ, they now have that citizenship.
Galatians 3:27–29

27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

“Jesus demolishes the wall that separates insiders and outsiders, lost and homeless men and women, aliens and strangers. In its place He builds a place of peace.”
– Eugene Peterson, Practice Resurrection (p. 127)

Ephesians 2:15 tells us that Christ's purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of two separate peoples. The Jews are no longer the only “insiders”; the Gentiles are no longer the “outsiders.” As mentioned in the Home Study this week, it is hard for us to comprehend how difficult that would have been for the Jewish Christians to hear. In a sense, the party just changed from being invite-only into a public event posted on Facebook for all! This is an oversimplification, but imagine for a second that someone you don't know that well but would like to be better friends with invites you over for dinner. You might think, “I'm in! We're going to be good friends now!” This is going to happen!” And then you find out everyone you know was also invited to dinner. Now imagine the impact of hearing that it was no longer just Israel who was invited to God's eternal plan.

What is this new humanity Paul is talking about in verse 15? It's the same new humanity he writes about in Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” It's the same new humanity he writes about in 2 Corinthians 5:17: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

This is humanity redeemed. This is humanity as it should have been, humanity recast and remade into the image of Christ. This isn't a future thing—notice that Paul isn't saying, “Some day when Christ returns, you will all be God's new humanity.” No, this is a present reality, a process that began on the cross and is happening in us even now. The ways we might classify ourselves—by race, ethnicity, gender, age, marital status, income level, etc—don't vanish when we come to know Christ. But these identities we attach to ourselves and each other are no longer our primary identities. The church is God's new humanity, living in a counter-cultural way that unites us as brothers and sisters no matter our differences. There are countless ways that our culture and world create distinctions between people. We must be alert to and proactive against the subtle ways that divisions are created, for the Scripture passages we read today—and in fact, the message of reconciliation that is the whole gospel—does not allow room for an “us vs. them” mentality!
CONVERSATION TIME

1. Ephesians 2:11–16 speaks specifically about peace and unity. Paul does not say here that we become God’s new humanity by being moral; rather, Christ has done the work of making us into a new humanity by reconciling us to one another, and to God. Where do you see Christians acting like God’s new humanity in the world?

2. In your experience, what is the world’s reaction if and when they do encounter this kind of new humanity?

3. In the home study, you were asked if there were any tangible steps you could take towards breaking down any “dividing walls” we might have within our church. Take some time to discuss those—what walls do you see? Where is God calling you to be a part of breaking them down?

4. We don’t like to think of ourselves as being hostile towards anyone, and yet Paul uses the word “hostility” twice in two back-to-back sentences (vs. 14–16). In both cases, Jesus is destroying hostility—breaking it down in verse 14 and putting it to death in verse 16. Consider honestly for a moment: is there a group of people or a person that you feel hostility towards, inside or outside the church? You don’t have to share the answer, but what might happen if you invite Jesus into that hostility?

QUESTIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

Take a few minutes in silence to be with God; ask God these three questions. Spend time in prayer and then, if you feel comfortable, share your answers with the group.

• God, what do you want me to learn from the study, sermon, or conversation?

• God, who do you long for me to be in light of this truth?

• God, what are you calling me to do in response?

PRAY TOGETHER

Pray for any specific needs within the group. Pray for each of us, that we might be agents of peace, unity, and reconciliation not just within the walls of our church but everywhere. Pray that we as the church might be ambassadors of God’s new humanity, standing in opposition to the division, suspicion, and hostility of the world.
The Church Is the Household of God.

HOME STUDY
Complete this part of the study at home before your group meeting.

EPHESIANS 2:17–20

17 So He came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through Him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone.

ROMANS 8:14–17

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

STUDY

The tough words of Ephesians 2 from last week continue for the Jewish Christians in Paul’s audience. For a people who for centuries had had their central identity rooted in being the chosen people of God, these sentences are nothing less than earth-shattering. Paul writes that through Christ, “both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.” He is essentially telling them: not only has the party been opened up to

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“A stranger was a foreigner; a sojourner was a resident alien. It would have been possible for a Gentile to adopt the Jewish religion, but he or she would never be received completely as a member of the family of Abraham.” Maxie D. Dunn, The Communicator’s Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 177.
everyone, but now you are in the same family as the people who you once considered to be outsiders! They aren’t leaving like guests would—they’re staying in your house. This cast a whole new reality for the Jewish Christians in the first church. Two thousand years later, does it cast a new reality for us? Though many of us are of non-Jewish origin, we most likely view ourselves as the insiders, sure of our salvation and our identity as those who know God. What does Paul have to say to us? Quite a lot!

Our culture is an individualistic one, and if we stop to consider this we can see where that carries over into the ways that we practice our faith. Our problems are our own, right? In our faith communities and groups we often put on a smiling face and answer the question, “How are you?” with a cheery “Great! How are you?” even when we’re going through a dark or painful time. We’ve been taught to buck up and pull ourselves together, independently. But what Paul is saying about church in Ephesians forces us to re-evaluate our habits of going it alone. In Ephesians 2, we are told the incredible news the Spirit give us access to God, regardless of how far away we were living from Him; more than that, we are members of His household. Think of someone famous you admire and imagine requesting an appointment with them, only to be told, “There’s a 3 p.m. on Tuesday available … or, you know what? Actually, we have some spare rooms in the house open right now. Why don’t you just move in?” It’s one thing to be given open access to our God. But far beyond that, He’s asked us into His family.

There are two realities that come with being members of God’s household. First, we have to come to terms with our own identities. Maybe we had absentee or bad fathers in our lives, and so the imagery of God as Father is troublesome at best. Perhaps we find ourselves struggling with comprehending the kind of unconditional love that God has for us because it doesn’t exist elsewhere in the world. Even the people who love us the best will disappoint us sometimes. Or, maybe it’s hard for us to let go of past sin and see ourselves as beloved by God. We might think, “I can’t forget my past … how could God?” Regardless of the reason, many of us have a hard time truly feeling like we are a part of God’s family, “co-heirs with Christ.”

The second reality is the company we find ourselves in. In the first week of this study, we described the church as “The family you would never choose for yourself.” Just as you don’t get to choose who is in your family of origin, you don’t get to choose who is in your spiritual family either! This might seem like a disturbing reality in some ways, because it means that our salvation community includes people who we disagree with politically, people we find irritating, people we have literally no earthly thing in common with—all sharing a house with us. And this is the absolute beauty of the Good News, that the transformational power of Christ can remake us into siblings when we otherwise might never speak to on another! We must pray for God to help us see all people with His eyes, so that we might see them through the

\footnote{Romans 8:17}
lens of Christ and feel love, mercy, grace and compassion. At the end of the day, we all call out, “Abba!” to God, and in this Scripture teaches we are knit together as brothers and sisters.

REFLECTION

1. Do you find it difficult to see yourself as a child of God, a member of God’s family?

2. Are there people in the church that you struggle to view as your brothers and sisters? This could be an actual person or people, or perhaps it is a general group of people (i.e. of a differing political party) that you have difficulty seeing as being in the same household as you.

3. Do you think of the church as your family? Why or why not?

PRAYING FOR THE CHURCH WITH PAUL

14 I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 I pray that, according to the riches of His glory, He may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through His Spirit, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (Ephesians 3:14–17) NIV
The Church Is the Household of God.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Open with a word of prayer by asking God to specifically reveal to each person these three things: what God wants you to learn from this, who God longs for you to be in light of this, and what God is calling you to do in response to this. Invite the Spirit to move in your hearts and minds during this time together.

Read the following Scripture passages out loud:

**EPHESIANS 2:17–20**

17 So He came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through Him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone.

**1 PETER 2:4–7**

4 Come to Him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and 5 like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.”

7 To you then who believe, He is precious; but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,”
“Paul’s … church metaphors pick up various aspects of church as place, not just an idea but a feet-on-the-ground place of hospitality where we are welcomed as participants with Jesus, who is our peace…”

— Eugene Peterson, Practice Resurrection (p. 128)

In the home study this week, we looked at what it means to be members of the household of God—now, let’s take a closer look at the construction of that house. Ephesians 2:20 tells us that the apostles and prophets make up the foundation, and Jesus is the cornerstone. 1 Peter 2:4–6 quotes other places in Scripture where Jesus is described as a cornerstone. In modern times, a cornerstone isn’t all that significant and is mainly just for show—a prominent stone with the date the building was built, or a dedication to an important person. Originally, however, it had structural importance: this was the first stone laid, and all the other stones in the walls would be positioned in reference to it.

This might all seem pretty basic to us. Intellectually, we know that Christ is our foundation, that He’s what we’re building the church on, etc. There’s an old children’s song about the wise man building his house upon the rock, not the sand; it’s language we’re very used to hearing. Jesus is dependable and strong, a logical place to build on … we get it! This metaphor of the cornerstone is so familiar to us that it might have lost its meaning.

But what does it look like not just to know and understand this truth, but to live it out as a community? Think about the entire weight of a building resting on a cornerstone. Do we rest on Christ in that same way? Are we so certain of our cornerstone that we know we don’t need to worry about the building falling down? Do we use it to align ourselves as we make decisions, both individually and together? Read the words of Ephesians 2:19–20 from Eugene Peterson’s The Message translation: “God is building a home. He’s using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what He is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now He’s using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together.”

Imagine yourself as a stone in the hands of the master builder, set in place with concrete on the cornerstone of Christ. He cannot be moved or shaken, He will not crumble or fail. You’re joined by the other living stones, your sisters and brothers, in order to build something strong and beautiful, something eternal: the household of God. What does it mean for us to not just know these things the way children know them, but to live like they are true?

10 Isaiah 28:16; Psalm 118:22.
CONVERSATION TIME

1. What are some of the regular anxieties and fears that can cause you to doubt Christ as your cornerstone?

2. How might you remind yourself to “realign” using Christ the cornerstone?

3. Are there other “cornerstones” you have built on in your life? How do they compare to building on Christ?

4. Does the image of church as family challenge or support your understanding of what “the church” is supposed to be? If you grew up in a church, is this what you were taught church should be? If you grew up outside of the church, is this something you identified with church?

QUESTIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

Take a few minutes in silence to be with God; ask God these three questions. Spend time in prayer and then, if you feel comfortable, share your answers with the group.

• God, what do you want me to learn from the study, sermon, or conversation?

• God, who do you long for me to be in light of this truth?

• God, what are you calling me to do in response?

PRAY TOGETHER

Pray for any specific needs within the group. Pray that the Spirit would draw us nearer together so that we might resemble God’s family, built into a house together with Christ as our cornerstone. Pray that the global church would likewise recognize each other as sisters and brothers and behave more like the family of God rather than a loose affiliation of strangers.
The Church Is God’s Dwelling Place.

**HOME STUDY**

*Complete this part of the study at home before your group meeting.*

**DEUTERONOMY 12:5–7**

5 But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as His habitation to put His name there. You shall go there, 6 bringing there your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, your votive gifts, your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks. 7 And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your households together, rejoicing in all the undertakings in which the Lord your God has blessed you.

**1 KINGS 6:1**

In the four hundred eightieth year after the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the Lord.

**LUKE 2:43, 45–49**

43 When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but His parents did not know it. 45 When they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for Him. 46 After three days they found Him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. 48 When His parents saw Him they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” 49 He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”
EPHESIANS 2:21–22

21 In Him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

STUDY

We have talked quite a bit in the past weeks about how difficult the new reality of church life would have been for the Jewish Christians—they were being asked to set aside their previous identity and customs and exchange them for new Christ-oriented ones. Ephesians 2:21–22 presents yet another challenge: for nearly a thousand years, the temple in Jerusalem was known to be the one and only dwelling place of God. This was why the Jews made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for important religious holidays such as the celebration of Passover, something we see Jesus doing in the Gospels.

In light of this, Paul’s words about the church—God’s people—being the temple and the dwelling place of God must have sounded completely ludicrous to the Jewish Christians! As one commentator puts it, “How radical the thought was to those who believed that the temple in Jerusalem was God’s earthly dwelling place. … Formerly outcasts, relegated to an outer court in the temple, the Gentiles are now themselves a part of the temple. God has His presence in them. The truth is glorious and demanding: we who by faith claim Christ as Savior and Lord are the habitation of God.”

We are the temple now, the place God makes His home on earth. This is difficult to grasp for all of us in some ways; the first century Jews are not alone in their confusion! We like to enter into holy spaces; it is much easier for us to comprehend God’s presence if there’s an actual place to go to encounter God. Certainly there are places for each of us where we feel God to be closer, more tangible; but He doesn’t actually live in those places. He lives in us; he lives in who we are together as a community. Instead of one temple, God has billions—living, breathing, and bringing His presence wherever we go.

REFLECTION

1. Are there places where you feel like God is nearer, or somehow more accessible to you? (For example, nature, or perhaps a particular cathedral or sanctuary.)

NOTES

2. Whatever your answers, what do the places you named have in common? (e.g., quiet, a visual element, something else you connect with)

3. Have there been times in your life when you have experienced that nearness of God’s presence not in a particular place but with a group—large or small—of other believers?

**PRAYING FOR THE CHURCH WITH PAUL:**

18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in His holy people, 19 and His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength 20 He exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, 21 far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. (Ephesians 1:18–21) NIV
The Church Is God’s Dwelling Place.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Open with a word of prayer by asking God to specifically reveal to each person these three things: what God wants you to learn from this, who God longs for you to be in light of this, and what God is calling you to do in response to this. Invite the Spirit to move in your hearts and minds during this time together.

Read the following Scripture passages out loud:

EPHESIANS 2:19–22

19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone. 21 In Him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

“The local, immediate, participatory aspects of church are extended by describing us as the building materials used to construct church. Men, women, and children are just as material as boards and bricks. Apostles and prophets are foundation stones. Jesus is the cornerstone…And we are whatever else makes up the structure: rafters and joists, flooring and roofing, door and window frames.”

– Eugene Peterson, Practice Resurrection (p. 128)

This week, we see how Ephesians 2:21–22 literally and figuratively builds on the two previous verses. The household of God, joined together in Christ, grows into a “holy temple in the Lord.” Simultaneously, we are being built into a dwelling place for God—together. In other words … there’s some major construction work happening, not just on us as individuals but who we are together!

Church is a place where we are “built together spiritually.” Imagine trying to build something with just one brick… you can’t make much of anything, except maybe a doorstop. Similarly, you can be a dwelling for the Holy Spirit all by yourself, but it’s sort of like being just one brick. We live in an era when many people have pulled away from the church for a number of reasons, many of them very valid and understandable.
But these two verses cast a vision—not for a bunch of individual believers off doing their own thing, but for the believers to be together. Together we reside in God’s household, together we are built into the ever-growing temple, and together we are the place God lives on earth.

Quite often when a natural disaster hits or some awful violent news-making incident occurs, we hear people say, “Where is God?” According to this passage, He’s in us, and not just as individual believers. Whether we meet in a big church, a school auditorium, or a home, when we come together as a salvation community, we are His dwelling place. We speak often about being the hands and feet of Christ in the world; we don’t really talk much about being the place where God is at home. Is He here, not just when we come together for an hour on Sunday to worship, but in our relationships with each other? In our groups and the activities and programs we are a part of? It’s something to ask ourselves, no matter what we’re doing: “Does God feel at home here?”

**CONVERSATION TIME**

1. Do you typically think of the church—not the building, but the community of believers—as a “dwelling place for God”? Why or why not?

2. How challenging is it for you to think about your faith journey as a communal effort rather than a solo one? Does the idea of being built together with other believers attract you or scare you?

3. What it could it look like if we each tried to make an extra effort to be part of the “togetherness” of the church the next time we do something church-related—whether it’s a Sunday service, a life group, a men’s or women’s ministry event, etc. For example, it could mean welcoming someone new or pausing to catch up with someone you haven’t spoken to in a long time.

4. We have a beautiful location, there’s no question about that! What if the first thing visitors noticed about Bel Air wasn’t the beauty of the mountain view but the way they felt the presence of God in our community? What if they walked away thinking, “God lives in those people”? What are some tangible ways we might help make that happen?
QUESTIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

Take a few minutes in silence to be with God; ask God these three questions. Spend time in prayer and then, if you feel comfortable, share your answers with the group.

• God, what do you want me to learn from the study, sermon, or conversation?
• God, who do you long for me to be in light of this truth?
• God, what are you calling me to do in response?

PRAY TOGETHER

Pray for any specific needs within the group. Pray God would give each of us the longing to be known as the people in whom God dwells, to the point where that is what visitors remember first. Pray that we would be joined together in Christ in such a way that none of us would prefer to go it alone.
The Church Is The Bride of Christ.

HOME STUDY

Complete this part of the study at home before your group meeting.

EPHESIANS 5:21–32 (NIV)

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave HImself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves His wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— 30 for we are members of His body. 31 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Note: This passage begins the “household code” section of Paul’s letter, which covers guidelines for the relationships within the household—husband/wife, parents/children, master/slave. Household codes can be found in other Greek literature of the time; Paul’s is distinctly different in that rather than giving men authority to do anything they please, as standard morality codes did, he suggests sacrificial love and care. Paul J Achtemeier, Joel B Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 387.
Historically, this is one of the most misused and misunderstood passages in the Bible. These misunderstandings have had a negative impact on women, and sometimes have even been used as a support or excuse for domination and abuse in the home. This is terrible for obvious reasons, but also because a poor understanding of the human relationships mentioned here lead to a poor understanding of the spiritual relationship between Christ and the church. So, how do we approach such a historically divisive passage? There are whole books devoted to this subject, but we will just do a very brief overview in the time we have.

First, we must consider the cultural context. In the first century, women had a very low status. In many regards, they were considered property. Paul’s directives for husbands to love their wives just as they love their own bodies were quite radical in a time when women had little to no worth. Because that is no longer the case, the verses that shock us most today are the verses directed towards the wives—but the shocking verses for the readers and hearers of the first century would have been those directed at the men. Most shocking of all would be verse 21: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” This was a radical suggestion for a culture where men had all the power, significance, and authority. So, rather than taking the particulars of our modern households and trying to make them fit into a first century box, we should focus on what Paul is saying about Christ at the heart of this passage.

A New Testament scholar writes, “Submission is an ethical theme that runs throughout the New Testament. It is to be the posture of all Christians because we are to follow the crucified Lord who emptied Himself to become the servant of all. Submission is the cross-style to which we are called. Jesus not only died a cross-death, He lived a cross-life of submission and service.”

Verse 21, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ,” is the lens we read not only this passage through, but all passages pertaining to human relationships. It’s also one of the most difficult things we are asked to do as the body and bride of Christ. It’s fairly easy for us to follow a list of “do nots”—but this is a “do” that requires a lot of us because it goes against our self-important natures. In fact, the only thing that makes us capable of submitting ourselves to one other is Christ Himself. He is both the ultimate model of, and the fuel for, this “cross-life” we have been called into.

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1. “Jesus not only died a cross-death, He lived a cross-life of submission and service.” What are some ways that Jesus submitted Himself to others?

2. In what ways is the mutual submission of verse 21 counter-cultural even today?

3. The church has earlier been described as the body of Christ, and in this passage as the bride of Christ. With these two powerful images in mind, how might you counsel a friend who is fed up with and considering leaving the church for good?

PRAYING FOR THE CHURCH WITH PAUL

23 Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love. (Ephesians 6:23–24) NIV
The Church Is The Bride of Christ.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Open with a word of prayer by asking God to specifically reveal to each person these three things: what God wants you to learn from this, who God longs for you to be in light of this, and what God is calling you to do in response to this. Invite the Spirit to move in your hearts and minds during this time together.

Read the following Scripture passages out loud:

EPHESIANS 5:29–32

29 For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” 32 This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

REVELATION 19:6–9

6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,

“Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.
7 Let us rejoice and exult
and give Him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;
8 to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure”—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

9 And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.”
Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be His peoples, and God Himself will be with them; He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

“Ephesians, more than any other text in Scripture, pairs Christ and church. Eleven times in this brief letter, Christ and church are set alongside one another as intertwined, inseparable.”

— Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection* (p. 150)

There is much about God that is difficult for us to comprehend because we have nothing earthly to compare it to. For example, it is challenging to understand the kind of unconditional love the Lord has for us because even our most loving relationships on earth fail sometimes. So, throughout Scripture, imagery and metaphors are used to help us try to wrap our brains around some part of the reality of life in God that would otherwise be impossible to understand. In Ephesians 5, Paul uses the metaphor of a bride to help us understand the depth to which Christ loves the church and the oneness we’re meant to have.

This isn’t the only place this imagery is used; we see it again in the above passages from Revelation in describing what will happen at the end of time. Over the past several weeks we have looked at the multiple metaphors for the church that Paul used to try and articulate what is hard to understand—our relationships within the church, the relationship of the church and Christ, and the importance of the church to God. There is a great deal of mystery in these things; the metaphors give us as much understanding as we can have and also remind us that the reality is so much more than we can even grasp.

What is one of the most joyous, festive, and fun occasions we have as the human race? A place where we gather with family and friends and strangers to eat and drink to celebrate as one? When these Scriptures were written, as now, the answer is a wedding banquet. This is the closest thing we have in our earthly reality to what will be our
heavenly reality, which is to say that it most certainly pales in comparison to that future reality we have together with Christ. One thing is certain: Christ loves the church more than we can possibly imagine!

CONVERSATION TIME

1. What are your thoughts about this week’s metaphor for the church, the bride of Christ? What does this image say to you about Christ’s relationship to the church?

2. Think about the best wedding celebration you’ve ever attended. What made it memorable? What was so good about it?

3. Revelation 19:7 says “…the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready…” How do you think we as the church/bride can “make ourselves ready” for the time when we will be united with Christ?

4. How does the imagery and idea of a wedding banquet differ from how you may have previously thought about heaven? How does it differ from how heaven is portrayed in pop culture?

QUESTIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

Take a few minutes in silence to be with God; ask God these three questions. Spend time in prayer and then, if you feel comfortable, share your answers with the group.

• God, what do you want me to learn from the study, sermon, or conversation?

• God, who do you long for me to be in light of this truth?

• God, what are you calling me to do in response?

PRAY TOGETHER

Pray for any specific needs within the group. Pray that as we look towards an eternity of joyous union with Christ, we can help others experience the goodness of life with Christ now. Pray that we all might comprehend the depth of love Jesus has for the church and experience some of that same love.
The Church Is Us.

HOME STUDY

*Complete this part of the study at home before your group meeting.*

EPHESIANS 4:1–6

1 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

STUDY

Paul is pretty nonchalant about mentioning that he’s writing this letter from prison; he waits until chapter 3 to say anything and just notes it in passing. Likely, the churches in the Ephesus region who received the letter already knew of Paul’s imprisonment and that’s why it’s not “headline news,” but for us it’s important to keep in mind. When we consider getting more plugged in at church, or stretching ourselves to do something outside of our comfort zones that we feel God nudging us towards, isn’t it easy for us to think first about our limitations? “I’m too busy”…“I don’t know the Bible well enough”…“I’m not a good enough Christian”…“I’m too shy”…The litany of our limitations sings out loud and clear whenever we even begin to consider taking a step towards God’s calling for us.

And here is Paul, in prison, writing letters. First century prisons were essentially holes in the ground, not what we have today. Yet, he doesn’t let his difficult circumstances prevent him from doing what he can do: writing letters of conviction, encouragement, and hope to churches; and praying. We have been using Paul’s prayers for the church from Ephesians each week of this study; his heart for the believers is so tangible in those words. He used his gifts of teaching, encouragement, and wisdom for the good of the church, in spite of his circumstances. If we were asked to list off the most significant things a person could do for the church, how many of us would ever think of writing letters? Yet, God blessed these simple acts of faithfulness—and here we are, still being encouraged as a church by Paul today.
Paul’s circumstance of being in prison also adds extra weight to his words. In the passage we read today, he begs the believers to live out their calling in Christ with humility, gentleness, patience, love, peace, and unity. Imagine someone writing these words from a lounge chair on an opulent veranda overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. It would be pretty easy to suggest living lives of gentleness, love, and peace, wouldn’t it? Now imagine writing them from a dark and airless underground prison. Paul could only write these words, and mean them, if he did not allow his circumstances to overpower what he both knew and felt to be the truth of the gospel; and because of that the Holy Spirit was able to use him in a mighty way.

REFLECTION

1. Has there been a time in your life when you stepped out in faith despite some limitation or difficult circumstance? What happened as a result?

2. Is there something you’ve been feeling nudged by God to do that you have been putting off because of a limitation? Instead of asking God to remove that limitation or circumstance, ask Him to help you see how you can obey in spite of it.

3. We have already talked about how it is important for us to be the body of Christ with our scars visible. Sometimes the things we’re embarrassed about and want to keep hidden could be the very things that would help give our words more weight. Does anything come to mind? Pray and think about how your own limitations and circumstances might be a blessing to others if they knew about them.

PRAYING FOR THE CHURCH WITH PAUL

18 Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. 19 Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. (Ephesians 6:18–20) NIV
The Church Is Us.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Open with a word of prayer by asking God to specifically reveal to each person these three things: what God wants you to learn from this, who God longs for you to be in light of this, and what God is calling you to do in response to this. Invite the Spirit to move in your hearts and minds during this time together.

Read the following Scripture passages out loud:

EPHESIANS 6:21–24

21 So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus will tell you everything. He is a dear brother and a faithful minister in the Lord. 22 I am sending him to you for this very purpose, to let you know how we are, and to encourage your hearts. 23 Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

“There is more to the church than sermons and sacraments, theology and liturgy, Bible studies and prayer meetings, committee minutes and mission statements. There are names, meals, small talk, births, deaths. There is us.”

– Eugene Peterson, Practice Resurrection (p. 271)

If you look at the endings of Paul’s other letters, you will usually see a list of personal greetings. Romans 16, for example, concludes with quite a long list of them: “Greet Prisca and Aquila, greet Epaenetus, greet Mary …” and every greeting includes some little bit of information that shows what these people meant to Paul. We can only speculate why Ephesians is different, but perhaps Paul was relying on Tychicus to give the greetings in person. Who is this man that Paul entrusts with such an important task? Tychicus shows up a few times elsewhere in scripture—first in Acts 20:4, then mentioned by Paul in Colossians, 2 Timothy, and Titus.

We don’t know much about Tychicus, other than that he is described by Paul as a “dear brother and faithful minister” and that he was sent by Paul multiple times to visit churches and carry his letters. This is the body of Christ that Paul talks about so much in action. Paul wrote this profound letter from prison; it would have been useless without someone to deliver it. And Tychicus was doing much more than simply delivering the letter; Paul says, “Tychicus will tell you everything.” As Peterson puts it in the quote above,
Tychicus knows the names, meals, small talk, births and deaths. He knows the family news to tell the other members of the family. What he has to tell the churches of Ephesus is just as important as the letter is carrying.

And so we’re left, nearly two thousand years after the church was born, to ask the question: what is church? Is church a building? Is it the senior pastor? Is it the worship service? Is it a place we attend once a week? Is it the place we support with our time and money?

How do you think Paul and Tychicus would have answered?

We know the church, like Jesus, was Spirit-born. We know the church is us, and we know we are Christ’s body, God’s new humanity, God’s family, a holy temple and dwelling place for God, and the bride of Christ. This is our identity; this is who we are as the community of Christ-followers. Will we accept that identity? Will we navigate the heartaches and joys that being the church entail? Will we be the living, breathing body whose primary testimony about the power of the gospel is the way we love each other? We must answer this question for ourselves, but a “yes” to a deeper idea of church means we can live out the answer not on our own, but together.

CONVERSATION TIME

1. Share words to fill in the blank: The church is_____. Have your words changed at all from the first week we did this exercise?

2. Reread Eugene Peterson’s quote from the previous page. Why is it so easy for us to slip into the pattern of treating church like it is “sermons and sacraments, theology and liturgy, etc.”?

3. How might we encourage each other to live out this deeper idea of church? In other words, how can we encourage each other to remember that ultimately the church is not just a service we attend on Sundays, not just pastors and programs, not just sermons and staff, but that the church is us?

4. Which of the metaphors from the past several weeks speaks most strongly to you? Which one do you find to be the most challenging to live out?
QUESTIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

Take a few minutes in silence to be with God; ask God these three questions. Spend time in prayer and then, if you feel comfortable, share your answers with the group.

- God, what do you want me to learn from the study, sermon, or conversation?
- God, who do you long for me to be in light of this truth?
- God, what are you calling me to do in response?

PRAY TOGETHER

Pray for any specific needs within the group. Pray for our church family, that we would always be growing together as the body of Christ, the new humanity, the household of God, God’s dwelling place, and the Bride of Christ. Pray that each of us can remember that the church is us, and that we would boldly step into our callings together.
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“for just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

— I CORINTHIANS 12:12