

## SUMMARY AND STUDY SUGGESTIONS

Over the past 14 weeks (we started on October 8 and skipped a couple weeks around Christmas) we have been looking at the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians with two angles of reference—like focusing on an object with both eyes at the same time. With the one eye I have been trying to focus on the meaning of the message that Paul's words convey to us as its beneficiaries. This means anticipating that these Bible verses will inform and clarify the meaning and experience of our lives. This requires that we interpret each word, thought, and theme within the broader context of the Bible as a unified whole. This is the most natural way for us to read and interpret the Bible as the beneficiaries of its good news. With the other eye I have been trying to bring into focus some of the more intentionally God-focused ways in which our human souls need to process and appropriate the 'information' that is contained in the text. This is the less obvious—but critically important—component of Bible study if we are going to avoid the danger of “seeing or hearing but not understanding,” which Jesus warns us about in such passages as Matthew 13:10–23.

The issue at stake is always whether we can get beyond just thinking (and feeling) our own best thoughts (and feelings) about the message of God's Word. We need to live with its truths on a level where God himself—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—comes back into focus as the integrating center not only of our own thoughts and experiences, but of everything. As “autonomous sinners,” or “identity constructing selves” — we have irreversibly crossed beyond the intended boundaries of God for human creatures and are determined that we can “know good and evil” according to our own “common sense.” Left to ourselves, therefore, we will always study the Bible with a view to “what we can get out of it,” and assume that what we need to do is learn its concepts and try to “apply” them—as much as we can—within our daily experiences. We want to ‘make sense of it’ in such a way that we can make use of it to change and improve our lives.

The problem, as I see it, with this one-eyed approach is that it always leaves us in the driver's seat. What “we get out of God's word” is determined by “how much effort” we put into it, or how thoroughly we study it, or how diligently we apply it. Of course, this is a basic principle that seems to hold true in such spheres of life as education, learning, and self-improvement, etc. But we finally fall far short of God's intentions for our lives—and his Word—if we resort to thinking and functioning as autonomous “identity constructing selves.” In Jesus' words our self must be hung on his cross with him in order for us to enter into his resurrection life. One corroborating piece of evidence for this assertion is that the path of “self-determination” always, ironically, leads us down various paths of “tribalism”—we inevitably find and copy some socially constructed set of ‘norms’ to legitimate our thoughts and conduct. Chameleon-like, Our souls take on the shapes and color of whatever (or, usually whoever) may promise us the greatest sense of security and significance. Christian faith, in these terms, provides resources for self-preservation and self-improvement, but betrays its dependence on redemptive grace.

The scary thing—according to Jesus in such passages as Matthew 25:31–46—is that we can do all sorts of impressive “Christian” things “by way of appropriating and applying *our* knowledge

*about* him and still be lacking what we really need: *his* personally engaged knowledge of *us*. God seems to have created us with the intention that our “self” always functions ‘in orbit’ around something that is much bigger. He did so in order that we would recognize and appreciate how perfectly he fills the true center of gravity for a human soul. Biblically speaking, “sin” means we have broken free and are desperately trying to provide for ourselves either some other, more convenient, center of gravity around which to orbit or some way to make ourselves the center of someone else’s orbit.

The gospel assumes that the human soul, as God’s creation, grows and sustains its intended individuality only when its focus and dependence orbits entirely around Him. Genuine God-consciousness, in other words, ought to displace our self-consciousness and free us to enjoy being a healthy human soul which has been created to fulfill all its potential ‘in the image’ of God. Happily, the gospel does much more than inform us *that* God-centeredness is the final solution for all our existential, moral, and spiritual dysfunctions. More significantly, it informs us that God has chosen to transplant or adopt or graft our dying souls into the self-sustaining life of his fully God-centered human son, Jesus Christ. God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

This means that we have to read God’s Word with a stronger focus on His actions and interpretations and experiences of our lives than on our own. (Here Karl Barth speaks of the double experience of *reading* God’s Word only to discover that *His Word* is reading us). God has given us two eyes and we need both to fully appreciate the beauty that he has built into his creation. Similarly we need to maintain focus both on God’s character and actions as well as our own in order to reach our full potential as creatures created with distinct capacities to willingly and lovingly *image* him within his creation. So, as we study Ephesians (or any text of the Bible), we need to be seeing God as the central character of every action. We want to be noticing all the ways in which he is doing his work within us. He is *forming* the image of his Son within us. We want to be—like Paul—genuine and non-stop in our sense of awe, and wonder, and gratitude in our discovery of *His grace*. At the same time, but always in subordinate sequence (i.e., always consciously as our response to his initiative) we want to be enthusiastic and diligent about finding ways to work out or *fill up* our living representation of his grace—“to *be* to the praise of his glory.”

So, as a means to the end of helping us move beyond the “theory-practice” model of self-improvement, I have been trying to promote what seems to me to be a more biblical/theological model of growth in God’s redemptive grace. One way of representing it would be to look at the Creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 and observe that God first *forms* the various aspects of his creation (days 1–3) and then he *fills* those forms with particular entities (days 4–6). Similarly, following the model of the ten commandments (Ex. 20; Deut. 5), we let the character and grace of God define the outer *form* of our lives (commandments 1–5) and then let him *fill* these lives within a correspondingly fruitful society of mutual commitments (commandments 6–10).

In our case, with the study of Ephesians the *form* and *fill* model seems broadly represented by appropriating the Lord’s prayer as the functional statement of the *form*, with the letter to the Church describing the ways in which the lives of these Christ-followers are being enabled to *fill* it. More specifically the *form* and *fill* model often alternates within the letter itself.

Ephesians 1:3–14: God has *formed* a true Father-Son relationship for all who are in Christ

So far, we have worked through the first paragraph of Ephesians (1:3–14), which is written as just one massive sentence in the Greek manuscripts. Because the essence of Christ’s human life is his absolute centeredness in the character and will of God the Father, all truly Christian impulses in our lives will begin with intentional orientation around Him. “***Our Father in Heaven,***” states the defining *form* of a life that is “in Christ.” If God *is* our Father in Jesus Christ, then it is so only because God has chosen to adopt us and redeem us and seal us and restore us into right relationship with himself and his entire created universe. God has placed his Spirit within us, who enables us to call God our Father—these are the centripetal bonds that keep us fully alive by keeping us moving in toward Him at the center of his universe.

Ephesians 1:15–23: This Father-Son relationship in Christ is *filled* with knowing God

In the last couple of weeks we have moved into the second massive sentence of Paul’s letter (Eph 1:15–23). Here Paul begins to suggest what it means to *fill* this relationship of adoption that God has *formed*. He begins by observing what has been reported to him; that their lives are noticeably demonstrating evidences of “faith in the Lord Jesus, and love for all the saints.” In other words, there is an out-working response to God’s in-working initiatives—a centrifugal force. And there can be so much more of this to follow. Paul proceeds to report how his gratitude to God compels him to pray for them. *Since* it is evidently true that God has begun to *form* their lives, Paul can immediately infer that the great purpose of their lives is now to *fill* their minds and hearts with knowledge of Him and devotion to Him. And here Paul gets more specific. He is eager for them to *fill* the *form* by means of certain growing and experiential engagements with God. In the terms of The Lord’s Prayer, Paul invites us to *fill* our address to God as our Father (an internal impulse which he has *formed* within us, cf. Rom 8:12–17) with a growing consciousness and experiential witness to the holiness (exclusive, incomparable, and absolute perfection) of his name (identity); the driving force of our lives becomes characterized by its first love—“***hallowed be your name.***”