

Study Guide: Week 1 TDs (To Dos)

1. Read the whole book, preferably several times.

If you have read the book *Inkblotitis* or looked at the “Ten Rules for Good Bible Reading,” you’ll recognize this as Rule #1. As you begin to read/study the book of Ephesians (as with any Bible book), this is the first step: read the book from beginning to end.

Which Version?

There are two main types of Bible translations: literal and functional or conceptual. A literal translation—sometimes called a “word-for-word” translation—tries to retain the phraseology and structure of the original language as much as possible. A conceptual (idiomatic or dynamic equivalent) version—“thought-for-thought”—seeks to communicate the same thought or meaning of the original (without strict adherence to the words or forms of the original). As expected, a conceptual translation is usually more readable, while a literal version works well when looking at the specific words and design of the text. We could think of them, then, as a “(for) reading” version and a “(for) study” version.

Actually, no version is completely literal or conceptual, but has elements of both and thus falls on a continuum from “completely free” to “strictly literal.” For this study, I recommend you use both: a “zoom-out” (reading/contemporary) and a “zoom-in” (study/literal) version. The first time you read a Bible book, you’re reading to get a sense of the big picture—the main story, the overall framework and context. So, on first read, I suggest you use a version that you like, one that’s fun to read. When we start focusing on specific details, I recommend the most literal version you can understand. If you choose to use just one version, then a “middle-of-the-road” version, like the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version), the NIV (New International Version), the HCSV (Holman Christian Standard Version), or the NET (New English Translation Bible—an online version) would probably be best.

For more on the question of which version of the Bible to use, I refer you to the section “The Version Question” on pp. 54-57 of *Rediscovering the Books of God*. Here’s the conclusion to that section:

“So what version should I use?” I’d like to make two general suggestions. The first is that, depending on your immediate purposes according to the rules of good Bible reading, you use both types: a dynamic equivalent translation for reading with an eye on the big picture (like when you want to read the book as a whole) and a literal translation when you want to focus on specific words and structure (more about this in upcoming rules)—thus, a *zoom out* and a *zoom in* version. Of course, the specific version is up to you, but, for a literal version, the NASB is a traditional standard. For a recent literal version, the English Standard Version (ESV) is quickly becoming a favorite of some serious Bible students. Any of the freer translations (but not the paraphrases) could serve as a fun-to-read, big-picture version—the New Living Translation (NLT) is the “pew-,” or in our case, “chair-Bible” of the church I attend. I’ve chosen to use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) for most of the

scripture citations in this book, though I'm partial to the New International Version (NIV) for my own English reading. My second recommendation is that, if you plan to use only one or one primary version, you choose something in the middle of the literal-free scale, like the NRSV, the NIV/TNIV, or the REB. These middle-of-the-road, dynamic equivalent versions can be both readable and useful for some detailed work as well.

Overview

(Bold = the specific questions/exercises of the week)

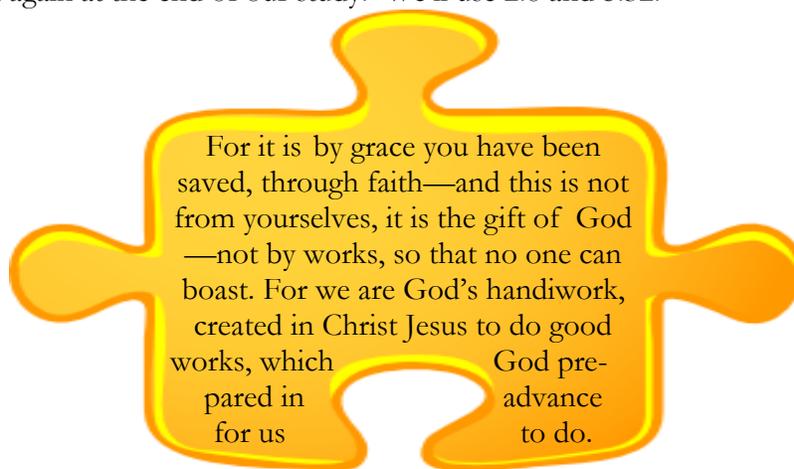
Describe in a brief paragraph (or to yourself) the overall story/picture presented in the book of Ephesians. Who wrote it? To whom? For what? (This is a much bigger question, isn't it?)

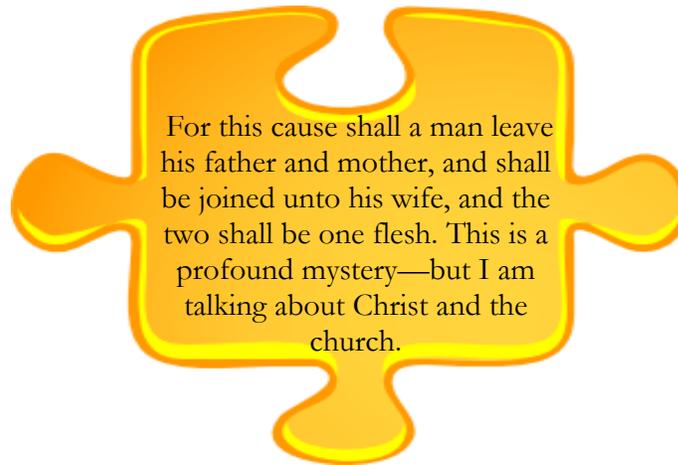
From your initial reading, what sorts of issues, requests, or ideas does Ephesians talk about? What are some of the main themes? What do you think is the main point or purpose of the book? (Of course, we'll revisit these questions as our exploration continues.)

Inkblots

When studying a Bible book, I like to pick out a verse or two at the beginning of the study to illustrate the importance of reading verses of scripture in context. (That way you can get a "before" and "after" view.) Any verse from the Bible can be turned into an inkblot when it's read in isolation from its book-level context. Several verses and passages from Ephesians rank as "classic inkblots" because of the way Bible-readers have cut them out from their original contexts: in particular, the prayer of **Eph 3:14-21** and the armor of God passage in **6:14-18**. Rule #2 of good Bible reading is to understand each verse as it relates to the book as a whole—"to book-level focus the verses." To illustrate how powerful and important this is, let's isolate a couple of verses from Ephesians and then look at them again at the end of our study. We'll use 2:8 and 5:32:

Eph 2:8-10



Eph 5:31-32**2. Find the Introduction and the Conclusion.**

Rule #3 of good Bible reading (as set out in *Inkblotitis*) is to “Discover the structure or ‘shape’ of the text.” To do this, a first and important step is to find or isolate the Introduction and Conclusion. It’s like finding the corner pieces when putting together a jig-saw puzzle. Introductions often introduce key ideas and purposes of a text; Conclusions sum up and bring them home. Isolating the Introduction and Conclusion also reveals the basic 3-part shape: Introduction-Middle-Conclusion.

Introduction

What verses (chapter and verses) serve as the Introduction to Ephesians?

Clue

In Paul’s letters, immediately following the initial Address and Greeting, opening Thanksgiving sections (“I/We always thank God for you . . .”) usually serve as introductions. So look for the beginning and ending of that section (find the Thanksgiving), which usually includes something that Paul is praying for his readers and often ends with climactic reference to the coming or power the Lord Jesus.

Ephesians 1:15-16: “For this reason . . . I have not stopped giving thanks for you . . .”

But . . . this so-called Thanksgiving/Introduction doesn’t come at the beginning. There’re fourteen verses before we get to it. After a typical Address and Greeting (1:1-3), Ephesians starts with “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .,” which—for those who don’t know—is the beginning of a Jewish prayer (a *berachah*). Whereas Paul’s letters normally begin with a Thanksgiving prayer report, Ephesians—though it also includes a Thanksgiving passage—begins praying like a Jew. So how does this Jewish-style prayer function at the beginning of Ephesians? We would expect it to serve some sort of introductory purpose, coming, as it does, at the very beginning, wouldn’t we? But why start this way? **Why does Paul start the book of Ephesians (a letter to Gentiles) praying like a Jew?** (If you can answer that question, you will be miles beyond

where most commentaries ever take you.) And how does this (Jewish) opening prayer relate to the Thanksgiving to follow? (. . . and to the letter as a whole?) Are there 2 Introductions? Or 1 long one? (Check out vv 12-13 in this regard.)

Conclusion

What verses (chapter and verses) serve as the Conclusion to Ephesians?

Consistent with Paul's letters and other letters of the day, Ephesians ends with some greetings and a blessing or wish of peace (and grace in this case) upon the recipients (6:21-24). (These sorts of "friendly" exchanges helped to accentuate a positive, community relationship on both sides of the letter—part of the "friendly letter tradition" of the culture). It's certainly easy to see these verses as part of the Ephesians Conclusion. But is there more to it—from a literary or rhetorical point of view? Remember that conclusions typically sum up the most important points, as they seek to influence the listener one last time. Are there any obvious relationships between the content and style of the Conclusion of Ephesians with the Introduction?

3. Set out the basic 3-part structure of Ephesians.

Having found the Introduction and Conclusion, you should now be able to set forth the basic, 3-part shape of Ephesians. Something like . . .

Introduction: 1:1 - ?:?
Middle/Body: ?:? - ?:?
Conclusion: ?:? - 6:24

Extra, Extra . . .

While reading Ephesians, you may have noticed another section of material that sounds a lot like a conclusion. In 3:14-19, kneeling before the Father, Paul prays for the readers of the letter with ornate and powerful words, reminiscent of the style and language of the Thanksgiving (1:15-23); he then praises God (3:20-21), as he did in the opening of the letter (1:3-14). The language is repetitive and conclusive, even ending with "Amen": ". . . to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." In other words, it certainly sounds like we've reached a conclusion here, doesn't it?—but it's in the middle of the letter!

Actually, what this means is that we've discovered a section of material that functions as a transition. By nature, Transitions have characteristics of both Introductions and Conclusions: they sum up and bring things to conclusion while introducing or moving to something new. Seeing 3:14-21 as a major Transition is an important discovery for ascertaining the overall shape of the letter. Ephesians 3:14-21 falls in the center and divides the book into two major halves.

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|---------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Introduction | Middle | Middle | Conclusion |
| 1:1 - ?:? | 3:14-21 | | ?:? - 6:24 |