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*Bible Studies for Women
from Moody Publishers*

1-WEEK SAMPLER INSIDE

AN 8-WEEK BIBLE STUDY OF *Ephesians*

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INCLUDED
in Christ

LIVING A NEW STORY FROM EPHESIANS

HEATHER HOLLEMAN

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Welcome! I'm thrilled you're here.

I'm so glad you chose to study the book of Ephesians. If I could choose *only one book* of the Bible to study and write about, it would be Ephesians. God used this book in my life to usher in the most profound and lasting personal transformation as I worshiped Jesus, surrendered my life to Him, and understood more clearly the story God has written for our lives. This letter by the apostle Paul—written most likely while he was under house arrest in Rome, around AD 60–62—will tell you who you really are and, most vitally, who Jesus is. It presents the astonishing reality of our being “in Christ” or in some translations, “included in Christ.”

We are *included* in Christ, and this changes everything about how we experience God and ourselves in relation to Him.

As we work through this Bible study together, you'll note all the attention to single words and phrases *as if I actually believe they have some kind of special meaning*. The Bible is no ordinary book; we should treat it, not as regular words on a page like the texts I read for my doctorate in literature or as you might read any other source of information, but as the authoritative, inspired words of God. I believe that the words of the Bible, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, serve as our authority and guide for living.

Consider the words Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16–17: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” We need God to help us understand the Scriptures, as when we're told in Luke 24:45 that Jesus “opened their minds so [the disciples] could understand the Scriptures;” and note the prayer from Psalm 119:18: “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.”

May Jesus open our minds to see Him in Ephesians.

If you are brand new to studying the Bible, or if you just recently acquired your first Bible, you might wonder about what you're holding in your hand. The Bible, simply put, is God's Word that teaches us how to have a relationship with Him through Jesus Christ and enjoy being part of His family forever.

God's Word, by the power of the Holy Spirit, reveals to us our need for a Savior to rescue us from the power and punishment of sin, and it showcases Jesus Christ—God Himself in human form—as the one name under heaven by which we are saved (Acts 4:12). By confessing our sins and receiving the free gift of salvation by faith, we become a child of God.

When we read God's Word, the Holy Spirit teaches, inspires, corrects, and guides us. We read the Bible because it instructs us how to live in the reality of a new kingdom, with a new King, who gives us a brand-new life. We gain a proper understanding of who we are; we learn a new way to connect with others; and we surrender to its truths as a way to truly live well. We also, most important of all, read the Bible to enjoy our relationship with Jesus.

SEVEN IMPORTANT VERBS

Ephesians is a letter from Paul that you can understand best by thinking about seven operative (or most important) words in this short letter. These words happen to be vivid verbs—my favorite! You should know that I study God's Word primarily through analyzing and internalizing verbs. As a college writing instructor, I'm obsessed with *verbs*. I love verbs like *grapple*, *fritter*, *effervesce*. I love verbs that create a mood (how to feel) and an image (what to see). I teach my college writing students to employ precise and vivid verbs in every single sentence.

I collect all the verbs in Scripture that God has used to transform my soul. If you've read my books or heard me speak at Christian conferences, you know I've focused on verbs like *seated*, *guarded*, *endure*, and *included* because these are the words God used to change me. And the seven words of our Ephesians study will surely change you as well. What we're going to learn in Ephesians together represents deeply transformational material. I hope that after you complete this Bible

study, people will say about you what they said about me: “What has happened to you? You’ve become a different person!”

You can answer as I did: “I experienced Jesus in a new way through seven verbs of a letter called Ephesians. It changed everything about me.”

WHAT YOU’LL NEED

To enjoy this study of Ephesians, you’ll need a Bible (I love the NIV, NASB, or ESV translations best, but use your favorite) and something to write on and with (a notebook, journal, pens, or a computer). While the study comprises eight weeks, five days each, feel free to keep your own pace each week and spend more time with days that challenge or inspire you. But on the day your Bible study group gets together, you’ll want to have read each day and provided answers to the questions in order to have a great meeting.

To get the most out of this or any Bible study, you need *a willing heart and mind*. In 1 Chronicles 28:9, David offers great wisdom to his son Solomon. I like to think about his words whenever I’m a student in a new setting. David writes,

And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every desire and every thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever.

Notice those beautiful phrases: *wholehearted devotion and a willing mind*. A willing and teachable heart will open the door for God to perform extraordinary transformation in your life as you study this short letter called Ephesians.

In Jeremiah 29:13–14, the Lord says, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you.” Isn’t that such a wonderful promise? Imagine the truth of it: If you seek Him in this study, *you will find Him*. He will let Himself be found by you.

WHAT MAKES EPHESIANS SO SPECIAL?

Ephesians isn't a book to take lightly. This is a powerful, direct, and paradigm-shifting book of the Bible. One theologian called the book of Ephesians "the most influential document ever written."¹ Think about that statement in terms of every book ever written in the entire history of the world. For someone to say that this document is the "most influential ever written" is amazing. This same writer said that if we read Ephesians receptively, this book is a "bombshell" in its ability to shape our thoughts and lives.²

What I love most about Ephesians—and why it transformed me so powerfully—is that it answers the most fundamental questions about our lives. Who are we? Where do we belong? How shall we live?

Most important, it answers the question of what it means to live "included in Christ" for the rest of our lives.

YOUR STORY

In addition to examining the verbs and key phrases in various sections of Ephesians, I ask questions to help you write the stories that have shaped your life in Christ (as well as the stories that keep you in darkness, not able to fully live out your identity in Him). As you briefly write down the stories that dominate your life and the ones you *wish* to shape your life, you'll grow personally and together with others. Besides delighting in vivid verbs, I'm also an instructor of stories; I teach personal memoir writing and what professionals call the Signature Story for advanced writing students.

The term "Signature Story" means a classic story that best represents who you are—like your handwritten signature. Students write a Signature Story about who they are, why they chose a particular career path, and what event has most shaped their identity and personal mission in life. The Signature Story is usually very short and easily shared in an interview setting. The Signature Story, at least in the business world, also makes a memorable point to inspire and instruct others.

For this study, instead of a Signature Story, we'll create a Savior Story.

The opposite of a Signature Story (or Savior Story) is what we'll call the Shadow Narrative because it's a story that you tell yourself over and over again that keeps you in the darkness of exclusion and loneliness, weariness, and toxic patterns of jealousy, comparison, and despair. I'll share more about both the Savior Story and the Shadow Narrative in Week One. If you're nervous about writing, don't worry. You won't be graded on anything; you don't need to read anything aloud if you don't want to; and you won't have to share your words with anyone if you aren't ready. But you can if you want to, and I hope you will.

You're invited to share these stories—both the Shadow Narrative and the Savior Story—and listen to other people share theirs. In my ministry role with Cru, so much of my coaching of women involves inviting them to tell a different story about who they are as a new creation in Christ. I began to wonder what it would mean for a woman to live in a different, biblical reality of a new mindset—her Savior Stories—to replace toxic tales of rejection, loneliness, weakness, decay, emptiness, and silence (her Shadow Narratives).

Wasn't the Jesus I met through the book of Ephesians a God who includes us, chooses us, seats us at the table, connects us deeply with others, refreshes us, empowers us, and proclaims truth through us? What if I asked the women I knew to tell those Savior Stories instead of the Shadow Narratives dominating their lives?

THE METHOD OF STUDY

As a college educator with over twenty years of classroom experience, I know that we learn best by comparing and contrasting information and providing images to remember what we're learning. Our brains store knowledge in two forms: linguistic (words) and visual (pictures). And the most fundamental way we learn is by comparing and contrasting information.³ Paul uses this model all the time as he writes. You'll see it in Ephesians 2 as Paul compares and contrasts the old, dead you to the one alive in Christ. Then he provides memorable images to recall your new identity, whether a seat, a body, a building, or even armor.

Each chapter, therefore, asks us to think carefully about the crucial verb in each section and to picture a scene in our mind about this verb. What ushered in my own fresh experience with Jesus was when I asked the question: *How does a person understanding this verb live?*

So you'll see these questions:

How does an included person live?
How does a chosen person live?
How does a seated person live?
How does a strengthened person live?
How does a renewed person live?
How does a filled person live?
How does a proclaiming person live?

But we answer these questions by first identifying their opposites—the contrast—to enhance how we make sense of our new identity in Christ. You'll see directives like this:

1. Name your Shadow Narrative.

What story do you tell yourself over and over again that keeps you from living this new story? You don't have to spend a lot of time with all the details, but jot down a few lines about the most dominant stories you hold about whatever verb we're discussing.

2. Compose your Savior Story.

What new story has God written—or is He currently writing—about this verb in your life? Set the scene using the five senses to describe yourself and the setting. What was happening (or is happening) in this story that the reader (or listener) needs to know?

3. List the contrasts: How does this new you now live? Compare the old to the new.

Part of my own work to mature as a Christian was to identify through lists what the “old me” was like. I contrast this with the “new self” of being alive and empowered by Christ.

4. Choose an image or object to remind you of the truth of this verb.

Images help us recall data quickly and can synthesize massive amounts of data in our brains. I collect many images from the Bible to help me remember the truth of who God is and who I am. I love picturing my “seat” in the heavenly realms, and this past year, I focused on living from the “fortress” of God’s care. Now, as you see on the cover of this book, I picture a mosaic to see my included identity.

WHAT MAKES WRITING SO IMPORTANT?

You may wonder why I ask readers to write down the story of their Shadow Narrative. Won’t that stir up negative emotions, trauma, and too much pain? What’s so important about telling the depressing story that’s dominating our lives and preventing us from living our Savior Story?

As both a writing professor and someone who studied the psychology of emotion for five years to earn my PhD (I studied shame and guilt), I’ve learned the power of writing, sharing our words in community, and revising our stories with a new lens in order to heal from shame and foster intimacy.

Scientific research has confirmed over and over again the benefit of writing down our negative stories. In psychologists James Pennebaker and John Evans’s book on expressive writing, they present a fine summary of what so many of us in therapeutic settings have already discovered. They write:

Since the mid-1980s, an increasing number of studies have focused on expressive writing as a way to bring about healing. . . . Writing for as little as twenty minutes a day for three or four days can produce measurable changes in people’s physical and mental health.⁴

We aren't necessarily writing about trauma or horrific events, but the point Pennebaker and Evans make is that writing expressively about negative memories benefits you.

And even if, immediately after writing, the person feels sad (which is normal), within a few hours, those engaged in expressive writing “feel happier and less negative than they felt before writing. Similarly, reports of depressive symptoms, rumination, and general anxiety tend to drop in the weeks and months after writing. Many other studies confirm the improvement in overall well-being, social interactions, and anger management.”⁵

My own therapy for six years as I battled depression and anxiety included daily writing. At my blog, *Live with Flair*, I've written daily since March 2010 as a spiritual practice to increase joy, hope, and meaning in my life with Jesus. My own doctors talked about the importance of writing for spiritual health. One showed me the research that said: “Writing in a journal activates the narrator function of our minds. Studies have suggested that simply writing down our account of a challenging experience can lower physiological reactivity and increase our sense of well-being, even if we never show what we've written to anyone else.”⁶

THEN WHY DO I STILL NEED JESUS?

At this point, you might wonder, “If positive psychology and cognitive restructuring work so well to make my life happy and meaningful, then why do I need Jesus?” What a great question! As research explodes in the area “narrative identity,” people who don't know Jesus and have no interest in Christianity apply the theories of revising personal stories, and they find great success in finding happiness, life purpose, and connection.

Yet such helpful techniques do not, and cannot, solve the problem of sin and separation from God. Positive psychology works as long as your emotions *are all you are*. But as a soul in need of salvation, your positive stories can only take you so far. They cannot repair your relationship with Jesus; right thinking, positivity, and storytelling cannot *forgive sin and lead you to eternity with God in heaven*. Writing

can heal some of the symptoms of our sin—our unhappiness, our disconnection from others, and our search for beauty in the midst of pain—but stories won't allow us to do what only the Holy Spirit can do. It is He who makes us alive in Christ and frees us from our enslavement to sin.

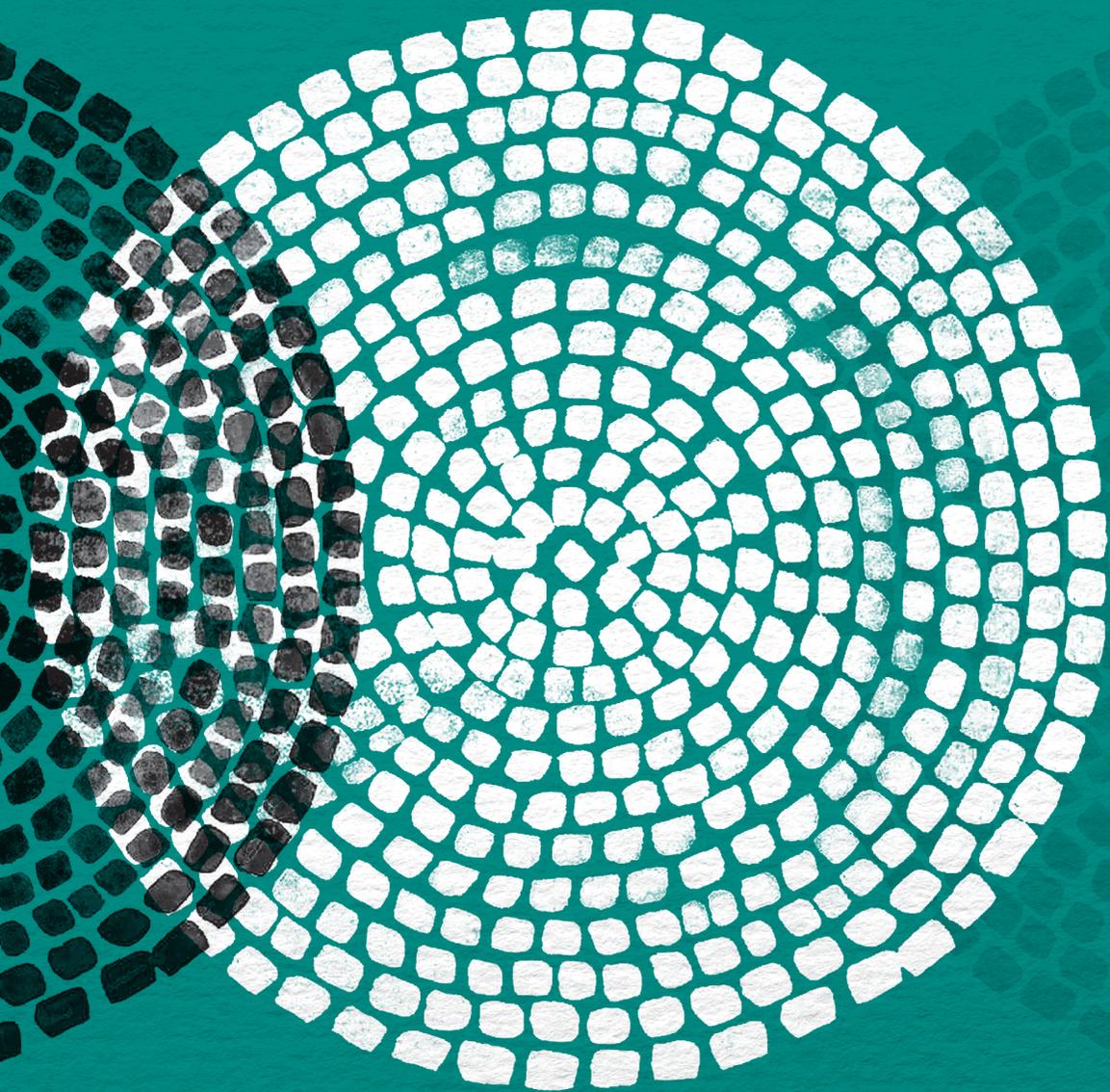
We are made for a deeper, more profound, and more incomprehensibly joyful and peaceful experience with Jesus and with one another, and positive psychology represents a mere whisper or shadow of all that awaits you in Jesus. That's why this Bible study excites me so much. It fuses what we know about redemptive personal stories with what Scripture teaches us about the reality of who we really are, and it sets us on the path to live daily in the presence of Him who tells the true story of our lives.

As both a Christ follower and writing professor, I'm thrilled to invite you to write and share as you wish. You don't always have to share your negative stories if it makes you feel uncomfortable, but you are always encouraged to share the Savior Story of God's work in your life through each week of this study. A friend recently said she enjoyed my challenge to transfer her thoughts into words. She writes that "they seem to stick in my mind longer when I do that, and I feel like I am making choices about what I believe and how I want to live when I write or type words."

By the end of this study, you'll quickly identify the ways your Shadow Narratives prevent you from embracing and fully inhabiting the truth of God's Word. And you'll have a new story to tell, your Savior Story, with visual reinforcement, to truly learn from the Scripture.

I'm so excited I can hardly breathe!

As we study Ephesians together and understand our new, shared life in Christ, may our peace, joy, and freedom together abound.



WEEK ONE

included

**An Overview:
Shadow Narratives and Savior Stories**

**"There is a strain of loneliness infecting many Christians,
which only the presence of God can cure."**

—A.W. Tozer



WEEK 1 | DAY 1

“IN” CHRIST

EPHESIANS 1–2

Read the first two chapters of Ephesians to begin our overview. Underline every time you read the words “in Christ” or “in Him.” As you read, think about what it means to be in Christ and how someone becomes included in Him.

This week is your overview—your broad picture—of the book of Ephesians. Before we begin looking carefully at certain passages in each chapter of Ephesians, let me explain why I called this study “Included in Christ.” If I were to choose one word to describe Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, it would be *included*. Isn’t that such a lovely word? To include someone feels so warm and inviting, so much like an enclosing embrace.

As someone who spent a lifetime feeling like an outsider and experiencing rejection—both real and imagined—the notion that I’m *included* reaches my soul like healing balm. For centuries, theologians and scholars have debated the central purpose and big idea of this epistle, and my historical and theological survey textbook tells me that “no unanimity has been reached”¹ about the governing theme of Ephesians.

But when I took a Bible Study Methods course for my seminary training, I couldn’t ignore that every chapter hinged for me on that verb “included.” This word actually only appears in the New International Version in Ephesians 1:13: “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.” In the Greek, the word “included” reads more like “In him you were also.” But the sense remains across all translations that “in him you also” means “you were included in all of this.”

The notion of being “included in Christ” unifies every chapter of this book. You and I are *included*. We are part of the whole of God’s family. Paul’s primary purpose in writing Ephesians has everything to do with explaining to readers—and reminding them again and again—that they belong not only in personal and actual union to a living Christ, but that salvation involves including them with one another as believers.

Those of you who love history and context will like this: The beauty and mystery of this book of the Bible is the astonishing invitation that Gentile Christians (once outcasts, non-Jews, not understood as chosen of God) are *included* as fellow citizens with Jewish converts. They are included in the family, part of the household, and resting under God’s favor with equal access to every spiritual blessing. Paul wrote this letter to remove any doubt that God’s gift of salvation extends to all people, not just the chosen Jews.

Paul wrote this letter to Gentiles—non-Jews—who might have wondered if they really belonged. After all, salvation was for the Jews, right? The Israelites were God’s chosen people, right? They were special, favored. And Jews believed that Gentiles were “unclean,” so reading that they were now somehow “included” in Christ—that salvation was extended to them, that Jesus could be for them, too, and that they could participate in all the blessings and privileges of being children of God—would have seemed strange, revolutionary even, and then comforting to Gentile readers.

But you have to imagine the context here: Picture the two most opposed groups you can imagine in your community. Think of racial tension, people acting superior to one another, backgrounds and cultures clashing. Consider how a Jew thought it would dishonor God to even eat with—or merely sit at a table with—a Gentile. Imagine sitting with people you consider terribly offensive to you. That’s what it was like for Jews and Gentiles to mix.

Ephesians, then, is a grand reconciliation where suddenly it didn’t matter what you looked like, who your parents were, what your social standing was, where you

lived, or what your cultural background was. You too were invited into the life of Christ.

If you read this letter through the lens of the Gentile outsider, imagine the words that could come to mind. Excluded. Insecure. Second-best. An afterthought. Maybe they were feeling like they were God's Plan B and invited to the party only because the A-list Jews were disobedient and stubborn.

Have you ever felt like this? Have you ever battled insecurity, rejection, a feeling of worthlessness? Have you been telling yourself the story that you just are not special, favored, chosen, *included*? Have you been living in the Shadow Narrative of your ethnic and family background, limited resources, failures, and limitations that make you feel that you don't belong with all the elite, talented, wealthy, successful, and confident folks?

The real story is that non-Jews were *always included* in God's plan. Gentiles were part of God's salvation story from the beginning and part of His eternal purpose. That's why much of this letter to the Ephesian church uses so many deeply theological words like *predestined* twice in that first chapter. That's also why Paul says that we were chosen "before the creation of the world"—to dissolve any insecurity that someone was only invited as a Plan B. He reminds us that we "also were included in Christ when [we] heard the message of truth."

If you're still confused about this, you can read the prophecy in Isaiah 49:6 about Jesus where God says, "I will also make you a light to the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Every time I read the words "you also" in Ephesians, I read it like this: "Yes, you! I really mean you! You're the one! Yes, I'm serious! It's you! You're included! You're chosen, too! It's okay that you aren't this or that. You! I chose you!" So much of this letter cries out for us to know that any one of us feeling excluded or far away from the "in crowd" is now brought into the family.

Paul uses so many beautiful images to help readers cement the truth in their minds: we're seated together (Eph.2:6); we're a household together (2:19); and we're the same body (3:6). Paul essentially instructs readers how to inhabit a new included mindset in those first few chapters.

Instead of rejected, alienated, separated, and lonely, we are now *included*.

What does it mean to be “in Christ”?

How does someone become included in Christ?

What parts of your background and current life experiences make you feel separated from Christ and excluded from the family of God? Write down at least a few sentences, and feel free to journal for at least ten minutes. Think about the setting, characters, and words spoken to you in these Shadow Narratives.



WEEK 1 | DAY 2

A NEW REALITY

EPHESIANS 3

Read the next chapter of Ephesians (3) to continue our overview, paying special attention to Ephesians 3:2–6.

Underline every time you see the word “together” in Ephesians 3.

Explain in your own words the “mystery of Christ” in Ephesians 3.

This is the new reality: we are *included*. Paul says we are “heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” In case we miss it, he writes *together* three times in this one chapter. We are together with Israel no matter where we came from, who our parents are, or what kind of money we make. We are heirs, just like a natural-born son or daughter.

I love the images that come to mind. I’m thinking of a big dinner table in a spacious Victorian house. I’m also, like Paul, thinking of a building where each brick is a different precious person. I see, too, a beautiful mosaic, like on the cover of this Bible study.

What comes to your mind? Maybe you’re thinking of a circle of friends beckoning you to join or a big fluffy couch of family members where there’s an empty spot waiting just for you. Everyone is calling your name to include you. You are invited here even if your background, clothing, physical ability, education level, or anything else doesn’t match the people around you.

The British historian of missions Andrew Walls wrote something astonishing about Ephesians that ushers this letter into our present reality. He uses the term “Ephesian moment” to signify this present-day miracle of how diverse and irreconcilable communities supernaturally come together through Jesus Christ to manifest His presence.

Walls writes, “None of us can reach Christ’s completeness on our own. We need each other’s vision to correct, enlarge, and focus . . . ; only together are we complete in Christ.”² We desperately need each other. You enlarge and focus my vision of Christ.

Perhaps I correct one area of understanding for you, and you show me something new about Jesus at the same time.

Additionally, Walls claims that we are in a new Ephesian moment in light of global Christianity where the largest centers of the Christian faith exist through the African, Chinese, Korean, and Latin American world.³ What does it mean to participate in the “body of Christ” and live as included with diverse cultures? Walls asks, “Will the body of Christ be realized or fractured in this new Ephesian moment?”⁴ Let’s think carefully about this question. Will we choose to live included in Christ and with our brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world, no matter who they are or where they originate? Will I look at Jesus through a *global* lens and not just my own small Pennsylvania regional lens?

Ephesians, then, isn’t simply about Jews and Gentiles, but it’s also about us *right now* living as Christianity expands throughout the whole world. There’s a new story to live of interdependence, of an unimaginable togetherness, and of a whole new paradigm of experiencing life.

But before we can live in this new together reality, we have to understand who we are individually in Christ. We need to know the characteristics of our new identity. Paul insists that we live from the new story; we put on the new self instead of living like the old, rejected and lonely us. Our included status now means several new

realities. This personal transformation—or a reprogramming of our muddled minds—represents all the new realities of our being “included in Christ.” The new realities come straight from each week of our study.

We are now included (Week One), chosen (Week Two), seated (Week Three), strengthened (Week Four), renewed (Week Five), filled (Week Six), and proclaiming (Week Seven). Can you imagine living each day like an *included* person?

Someone *chosen* instead of rejected or ignored?

Someone *seated* at the Greatest Table with the Greatest King instead of lonely and fighting for belonging?

Someone *strengthened* instead of weary and powerless?

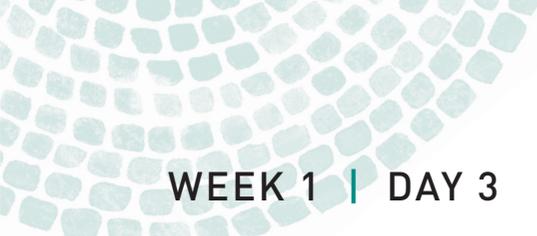
Someone *renewed* instead of languishing in sin?

Someone *filled with the Holy Spirit* instead of living in self-effort all day long?

And finally, someone *proclaiming* her Savior Story instead of living in silence or stuck in her Shadow Narrative?

Skim Ephesians again and locate each verb in chapters 4–5. Which parts of Ephesians so far (and which verb) make you most excited to dive into our study?

I pray the changes inside of you come rapidly and permanently as you read the book of Ephesians and let God’s powerful, authoritative Word transform your mind. I pray this Bible study goes down in your personal history as a spiritual breakthrough.



WEEK 1 | DAY 3

SPIRITUAL BREAKTHROUGHS

Begin thinking of the story you could share of the first time you felt included in Christ. Write down all the details—the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and even textures.

What single image comes to mind when you think of the word “included”?

I experienced a spiritual breakthrough in my burgundy minivan the other day—the same minivan with a dangling front bumper that, were it not for the black electrical tape securing it in place, would fall to the pavement as I drove. While clearly not the most glamorous location for an encounter with God, this minivan served as the setting for a soul-shifting moment.

I had been feeling particularly lonely that morning. I just didn't feel connected in any kind of meaningful way to most people around me. I wondered what other women were doing that day; were they shopping together, eating a delicious lunch, or laughing over Starbucks vanilla lattes and Instagram photos? Sure, I talked with women as I dropped off one daughter at Vacation Bible School and when I saw them at the grocery store in the produce aisle, but I still felt the loneliness of profound disconnection.

It's a terrible feeling. It ranks up there with some of the worst feelings a human can experience.

I'm in the minivan, thinking about my struggle to find deeper connection with folks and those times when my children or I experience loneliness. I'm talking to Jesus as I drive, my eyebrows furrowed and my lips in a frown. I don't want to succumb to this pattern of thinking anymore. I know this feeling like my own skin. This loneliness sends me to tears when I see other communities of people gathering together in friendship. I'll cry at plays and concerts just because I'm imagining the togetherness of the actors and musicians, and there I sit in the audience so lonely there isn't a word for it.

Have you ever experienced this kind of loneliness?

Do I have to live like this? Jesus, what is wrong with me? Is this feeling all in my head? Is my loneliness an actual truth? Is that reality? God, is this true? Or is this a big lie, these feelings and these circumstances? I'm just so lonely and disconnected! What do I do with these feelings?

From somewhere in my brain, I remembered Bible verses about being “included in Christ.” I recalled powerful, beautiful, and real pictures from Ephesians of *what is true*: I'm part of a body. I'm seated with Christ. I'm deeply knit in to the family of God. I'm deeply belonging to everyone else, and they belong to me.

I took a deep breath and felt something shift in my soul. The lonely feeling began to fade in light of the truth that I was included and connected to the family of God. I felt like the previously depressed and lonely person in Isaiah 49:21 who was once all alone but who now doesn't know what to do with all the people God has brought into her life. It's a fun little verse to read:

“I was left all alone, but these—where have they come from?”

I remembered my family, my church, neighbors, colleagues, and friends near and far. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed with how deeply related and connected I really was. *Where did all you people come from? I thought I was alone, but I'm not alone at all!*

The great lie is that we're alone, disconnected, alienated, friendless, awkward, and too hopeless for community. It's no wonder. Satan loves to separate people. He's the master of isolation. Satan drives people into solitary places. That's how he works best, like a beast isolating his next victim. Luke 8:29 describes a man who "had been driven by the demon into solitary places." When I realized that part of my old self, flesh, and even Satan desired to drive me to solitary places, I knew I could choose to fight against this plan and fit myself instead into God's design.

I was never actually alone; I simply felt alone. I felt driven to solitary places in my mind. But, by faith, I claimed the truth of who I am. I proclaimed my Savior Story to combat that Shadow Narrative of isolation:

I am not alone now or ever. I'm not disconnected now or ever. I'm not abandoned now or ever. I am in Christ and therefore deeply connected to God and to others. This is the reality of my life.

I exited the vehicle after arriving at Vacation Bible School when it was time to pick up my daughter, and so many wonderful friends and family greeted me with great love. There I stood in my unfashionable khaki shorts and old T-shirt with my brown hair in a messy bun. I told myself:

Now I see it as I've never seen it before. I'm included with these people. We are a family. The spiritual reality of my connection is a truth I know by faith. My feelings and experience may contradict this on bad days, but the truth remains: I am part of a great community in Christ.

Once I choose to believe it, the fiery dart of loneliness and isolation folds and crumbles against my strong and very real shield of faith. This spiritual breakthrough left me feeling happy because I felt *connected*. I pictured my body having a little rope coming from my middle like a tether connecting me to all the people around me.

I felt happy.

I felt secure.

I felt connected, and nothing had changed about my day. And now that the lonely feeling that kept me isolated left, I knew I had a choice to actively gather with others and live out the truth of my included story. I realized then the truth of the Harvard Grant Study results that I recently read and shared with my Penn State students. As one of the longest-running research projects ever conducted, the Grant Study measured 268 adults for seventy-five years to discover answers to what the key to a happy life is.⁵ It wasn't money or success or fame. It wasn't experiences or amenities or any of the things we often seek in life. The single most determining factor, the study found, of happiness and health was one thing: *warm relationships*.

Current lead researcher George Vaillant stated his main conclusion: “Warm intimate relationships are the most important contributing factor in the establishment of a good life.”⁶ I tell my students at Penn State all about this research, and I pose the question: “What if we measured happiness by how connected we felt to others?” As someone who felt deeply unhappy for many years, I evaluated what contributed most to that state. Indeed, my unhappiness related directly to *disconnection*—from God and from others (and even from myself).

I lost connection.

I wasn't relating to God, and I wasn't in vibrant community. Unhappy people often describe their profound loneliness. They experience isolation and a fractured sense of self. That was how I felt. Maybe you can relate as you read this.

As Christians, we are meant to participate in each other's lives. The Bible talks so much about our togetherness and our interactions with one another. We're *together* a holy dwelling. We're *together* a temple. We're *together* a body and a church. The *togetherness* of Scripture indicates a way we're designed to work best: together.

To see ourselves as entities unto ourselves is a misunderstanding of identity. We're most ourselves when we see our interdependence and communal (rather than isolated) selves. The lonely soul, the isolated soul, quickly experiences desolation. It takes some work and initiative, but we must press on to join community and help others do the same. We thrive and flourish *together*, just as God intended. When one of us suffers or sins, we are all damaged.

Yet American culture offers a full assault on togetherness as we have increasing temptations for isolation (I can do everything online without having to speak to a soul), self-promotion at the expense of community (young adults are taught to develop their personal brand in a world of competition and marketing), pseudo-connection through social media, gossip and comparison, jealousy and division. An important facet of spiritual growth must now include conversations about where and how we're fostering connection instead of isolation and division. We reflect the glory and beauty of God in our togetherness, so we must fight against those things that divide and isolate us.

List some of the ways you actively foster isolation in your life. Now list some of the ways you currently foster—or intend to foster—connection with the body of Christ.

Reread Ephesians 4–5. Make a list of how Paul's commands help foster connection with people. According to your list, make a column of opposite behaviors that threaten "togetherness."

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WEEK 1 | DAY 4

THE PROBLEM OF LONELINESS AND DISCONNECTION

Finish our overview of Ephesians by reading chapter 6. Continue to think about loneliness and disconnection as Satan’s strategy to attack God’s people.

Recently the *New York Times* named our problem an “epidemic of loneliness”⁷ and *Time* claimed that loneliness might be the next biggest public health issue.⁸ It’s no wonder, therefore, that many researchers currently explore chronic disconnection because of our culture of isolation, independence, competition. A national survey of college students in Canada reported the news that 70 percent of college students battled loneliness, claiming to feel “very lonely” and “so depressed that it was difficult to function.”⁹

Amy Banks, a psychiatrist who wrote *Wired to Connect*, claims: “One of the things that happens when you get into a hyper-individualized society is you begin to take relationship out of the equation of what stimulates dopamine. And then, people want the dopamine and replace it with another thing to do repeatedly.”¹⁰ To stimulate the dopamine we miss through relational interactions, we might overwork, overeat, or engage in sinful behavior over and over again.

Banks’s research proves that relationships, not isolation, stand at the core of human health and well-being. She even makes this astonishing argument that “relational neuroscience has also shown that when we are cut off from others . . . neural pathways suffer. The result is a neurological cascade that can result in chronic irritability and anger, depression, addiction, and chronic physical illness.”¹¹

I wasn't alone with that experience of loneliness that day in the burgundy minivan on that neighborhood road. And I wasn't alone in the resulting bad moods accompanying those feelings. I realized that when I was most angry, depressed, or acting addicted to food, television, or shopping, I might have stopped and said, "Wait! I'm not really angry, I'm *lonely*." Or, "I'm not really hungry, I'm *lonely*."

These feelings, unfortunately, get worse as we age. Research tells us that loneliness is on the rise and affects nearly 40 percent of the middle-aged population.¹² What happened in the minivan, and how the Holy Spirit prompted me to reframe the truth—moving from that Shadow Narrative to the Savior Story of belonging—is also rooted in science. In clinical studies of loneliness, for example, research tried to change the perception of belonging to help those battling disconnection.¹³ Those studying loneliness over a seven-year period showed how addressing *dysfunctional thinking* is the single most effective intervention.

No wonder I felt so good and so connected even though I was still physically alone in the van: I told myself the true story of who I am.

I'm included. I'm included with Christ and other believers all the time, no matter where I am.

I rejoiced that day that this "cognitive restructuring" didn't cost me a fortune in therapy or medication; it didn't require hours of meeting with a psychotherapist to heal. It required an attention to God's Word and telling my Savior Story of inclusion. In research terms, social scientists call what happened how I identified "maladaptive social cognition," or in other words, the incorrect or inaccurate ways we understand ourselves.¹⁴

It apparently does not matter if you take a lonely person and put them into new social situations. What matters isn't people or social interaction as much as how a *person understands herself*. It could be that distorted thinking—feeling and believing one is lonely—is producing the problem.

Thought distortion can destroy your life. It's part of our fallen condition and our sin nature, but we can begin healing by confession, repentance, and walking in obedience to God's Word about our identity. As I shared in the introduction to this study, cognitive restructuring indeed works to aid happiness, but it doesn't solve the problem of sin and our need for salvation. And it doesn't get to the core of our problem. It doesn't unite us to Jesus Christ—our heart's true longing and true home.

I'm learning as an educator and lover of Jesus and His authoritative Word that teaching people to identify their automatic negative thoughts, or their Shadow Narratives that follow them everywhere they go, and replacing these tales with the Signature Stories—their Savior Stories of identity from Ephesians—does indeed help people heal in profound ways. They find freedom from sinful patterns and experience Jesus afresh. They experience biblical inclusion, acceptance, and increasing joy.

Read [Philippians 4:8](#). How can reflecting on what you know to be true, e.g., your being included in Christ and being part of a community with other Christians, replace your Shadow Narrative of loneliness?

Why do Christians experience a special connection with one another that people who don't know Jesus miss? Talk about what you know about Jesus dwelling within you by the Holy Spirit and the effect that reality has on your connections with other Christians.

WEEK 1 | DAY 5

WHAT SAVIOR STORIES WILL YOU TELL?

Each new semester at Penn State, just as the crisp morning air and red-tipped oak leaves promise that beautiful Pennsylvania autumn, I invite a new class of writing students to tell me their Signature Story.

The Signature Story, according to a professor of marketing at Stanford (who popularized the concept for the business world), defines this kind of story as “an intriguing, authentic, involving narrative with a strategic message. . . . Signature stories represent a critical asset that can be leveraged over time and which can provide inspiration and direction. . . . The challenges are to find, evaluate, gain exposure for, and give legs to signature stories.”¹⁵ I teach my students that the story I’m looking for is *authentic*, *strategic* (meaning it helps their goals in some way), and serves as *an asset*. I stand in front of them, in a typical brown cardigan, glasses, and thermos of coffee with hazelnut creamer, and ask, “What’s the story you tell everyone about your life? What moments shape who you are and what you’re doing with your life?”

What’s the story you tell about your life? Is it authentic, strategic, and an asset?

They of course use these stories for personal statements for graduate school applications, for their professional portfolios, and for interview settings, but they also need these stories to sustain their sense of identity and calling to their particular career choices.

I sip coffee and wait as they begin to scribble down the moments that reveal who they believe they are. I call out encouragement as they brainstorm, quoting Mary Pipher’s words in *Writing to Change the World*.

You have something to say that no one else can say. Your history, your unique sensibilities, your sense of place and your language bestow upon you a singular authority. Who but you can describe the hollyhocks in your grandmother's backyard or the creek outside of town that you fished as a child?¹⁶

“You have something to say that no one else can say!” I call out. I remind them that, by the end of this unit, they will have a powerful story—one filled with all the skills of storytelling including great characters, tension and mystery, emotion, and a final revelation by the end.

But then I say the words that change everything about this process.

“Make sure you tell the *right story*.”

They stare back at me, pencils frozen in midair.

I explain that they may have a story they tell over and over again about who they are and why they do what they do, but it's not the best story. It might be a story that ends without hope and leaves the reader contaminated with a sense of defeat and a lack of meaning.

In the business world, for example, you have to be careful about the story you choose to tell because the Signature Story represents a highly strategic form of communication that shapes and enhances a company brand and provides a “north star” for future direction. Great stories fortify companies so that they thrive, enjoying success, loyalty, and longevity. Think about the Signature Stories you may have heard about Apple—the most recognized brand in the world—that showcase Apple as innovative and creative. Can you see Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak in that old garage, innovating something amazing?¹⁷ That's the story we're supposed to think of when we think of Apple. Or think about Nike shoes and the story of Phil Knight selling shoes out of his car, or Amazon, Coca-Cola, Disney, or a clothing brand you love. A company's Signature Story organizes all the important data someone needs to know about an organization. This story reveals priorities and

core values; it provides inspiration. This is the story others first think about when they think about a company or an individual.

What story about your life do you want people to think of first when they think about you?

While the Signature Story has everything to do with marketing and business strategy for branding, it also serves *as a guide for personal growth and insight*. The stories we tell ourselves and others about our lives matter deeply because we live out the narratives we believe are true about us. The stories we tell shape us, for better or for worse.

“What’s the right story?” a student finally asks.

“Well,” I begin and then take a deep breath. “The stories I hear students tell aren’t always Signature Stories. They are more like Shadow Narratives. These stories leave you in a state of disappointment, complaint, defeat, hopelessness, and loneliness. Have you ever met someone who complains all the time? Or who constantly rehashes a particular offense or hurt? Or what about someone who sabotages themselves because they keep telling themselves they’ll fail or that they aren’t good enough or that they aren’t smart enough? Do you know what I mean?”

They nod their heads. They know exactly what I’m talking about.

“Now is the time in your life when you begin to tell healing stories, hopeful stories, and harmonizing stories about your life.” I write it on the chalkboard in my crooked script: *Healing. Hopeful. Harmonizing.*

I continue: “A Shadow Narrative is the dark story that runs parallel to the joyful, positive Signature Story and attempts to overtake it, like when the setting sun elongates your shadow as you stand there. That Shadow Narrative is always the dark tale you’re tempted to tell about your life. These are always tales of loss and pain, victimization, hopelessness, defeat, loneliness, and disconnection. I see people who stay trapped in the Shadow Narrative all their lives when they could tell a different story about what has happened to them and why. Let the story you tell be a different story—the best story you’ve ever told—about the person you are and want to be. The right story—like a good verb—can change everything.”

You might have been hearing this term “shadow” bounced around lately. In the world of creative writing, the “Shadow Narrative” is like the off-screen story—another story happening alongside the dominant narrative that influences how the character behaves. It’s usually a dark and haunting tale.

I’m also drawn to this concept because of the “shadow” from Jungian psychology and, more recently, how Peter Scazzero modernized the idea in *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*. He writes a chapter called “Facing Your Shadow” and explains: “Our shadow is the accumulation of untamed emotions, less than pure motives and thoughts that, while largely unconscious, strongly influence and shape your behaviors. It is the damaged but mostly hidden version of who you are.”¹⁸ In psychology, the idea of the “shadow” dates back to Carl Jung. In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung claimed, “The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself up him directly or indirectly—for instance inferior traits of character and other incompatible tendencies.”¹⁹

The “shadow,” both in narrative theory and research in psychology, sounds much like what Paul describes as the “flesh” or the “old self.” It’s a story that holds us back from being who we want to be in Christ. It’s a narrative we feel trapped in that keeps us in darkness.

Think of Isaiah 59:9 and the state of our lives: “We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.” The Shadow Narrative can also be, therefore, the story of our sin. It’s often a story about what we most need to confess in our lives.

If your Signature Story—and now what we’ll call the Savior Story—brings the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, and self-control), the Shadow Narrative connects you to hatred, despair, anxiety, a demanding spirit, unkindness, harshness, bitterness, and impulsivity. The Shadow Narrative is Satan’s lie to you about your experience in life. It’s a tale of what’s being denied you, of all you cannot have, and of all that’s missing. It’s a tale that begins, like Satan’s question to Eve in paradise, about what you feel God has denied you.

| SAVIOR STORIES | SHADOW NARRATIVES |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Inspire hope | Keep you wounded |
| Describe God’s healing | Disconnect you from Jesus |
| Connect you to Jesus | Showcase self apart from Christ |
| Showcase Jesus | Delight in sin |
| Recall confession and repentance | Manifest Satan’s plan |
| Manifest God’s redemption | Deny or distort the Word |
| Proclaim the truth of the Word | Bring despair |

Through this first week of an overview of Ephesians, you have your first opportunity to consider your Savior Story of inclusion (and write out the Shadow Narrative you tell yourself of loneliness and disconnection). These four questions will end every week of our study:

1. Name your Shadow Narrative.

As you thought about your shadow narratives of disconnection, write for a few minutes about just one dominant story you tell yourself of your isolation and loneliness. Set the scene by describing your surroundings and what you remember about yourself—what you’re wearing, what you’re doing, and what you’re thinking.

2. Compose your Savior Story.

Write down the Savior Story of how you're included. What story can you tell of when you truly experienced being "included in Christ"? I told the story of my minivan encounter with truth, so you can use something everyday like that as a model. Or, if you presently battle loneliness and cannot think of a strong story, what has God has taught you as you read through the book of Ephesians and this overview? Choose one passage of Scripture to reflect on in your Savior Story.

3. How does an "included" person live? How do they act? How do they speak?

Contrast this with how excluded and lonely people live and act.

4. Choose one vivid image to remember that you are included in Christ.

I like to see a mosaic, or the rope coming out from my middle like a tether. What about you? Feel free to draw a picture of this image below. Use colored pencils if you wish. Enjoy this moment of relaxation as you consider your included identity.

CONFESSION, REPENTANCE, AND RENEWAL

Talk to God about the areas of your life where you have fostered disconnection and loneliness. Write down some of the behaviors, words, and attitudes that have resulted from this false belief and confess whatever the Holy Spirit brings to mind. Ask God to help you repent—to move in a different direction toward connection and belonging—and invite Him to renew this area of your life. Perhaps you need to forgive someone (or a group) who you felt excluded you. Perhaps you need to reach out to those you have excluded. State the Bible verse from Ephesians that you chose for your Savior Story, and thank God for His work in your heart.

Continue to dive deep with
Included in Christ

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