

OPENING HYMN

“Come, Thou Fount
of Every Blessing,”
(ELW 807)

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, you give us the gift of grace each day, not because of who we are or what we have done, but because of who *you* are and what *you* have done. Teach us how to receive your gift with all our heart, our mind and our strength, this day and every day. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”
(Ephesians 2:8)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- Hymnals (ELW)
- scrap paper and pens or pencils

Receiving grace: A study of Ephesians

Session one

Is grace real?

BY HEIDI HAVERKAMP

INTRODUCTION

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. (John 1:16)

What is grace? In the gospels, Jesus never offers a definition or even uses the word. It is Paul who brought the term “grace” into Christian life and thought. Although Paul would have used the Greek word for grace: *charis* (CAH-riss). It appears most often in his letter to the Romans (18 times), but he never defines it or tells us what he believes it means.

“Grace” appears 12 times in the letter to the Ephesians—the second most often of any epistle. We are going to study Ephesians to try to wrap our heads around what grace means to Paul, and how we might receive grace as God’s gift in our daily lives.

There is no definition of “grace” in Ephesians either. Grace is a living thing. Perhaps we can only define or understand it when we see it happening in our own lives or the lives of people close to us. A definition of “grace” from my own life experience is “an unearned, unexpected gift of mercy, forgiveness, redemption or blessing.” You may want to write a definition based on experiences in your own life.

My earliest memory of grace occurred at a hospital when I was six years old. I had cut my hand on a piece of broken pottery. My parents took me to the emergency room. The worst part wasn’t the blood or the stitches, but the pricking and probing

of the anesthesia needle beforehand. The pain was incredible. The attending nurse must've seen my face. She mercifully said to me, "Oh, honey, it's OK to cry." Her kindness broke my good-girl wall of reserve. I burst into tears. She didn't need me to be brave or to be a "good girl" to make things easier for her or the doctor. She just let me be who I was in that moment: a scared kid in pain.

Last year, one of my readers told me she wasn't sure she could believe in God's grace. Her words inspired me to write this study, which I hope can be helpful to all kinds of people, including myself. Even if we believe in God's love for us, our minds tend to imagine judgment first—like I did in the hospital when I was trying so hard not to cry and bother the adults. We assume other people are judging us. We judge ourselves. We judge people around us. Our minds seem to turn to judgment and criticism as a first response to almost any person or situation! And so we also imagine God's judgment and criticism more easily than we imagine God's grace.

But what if God is inviting us to turn our minds first to love and mercy? How does God invite us to choose grace and let go of judgment? How can we receive grace and live from it? We will explore this as we read through Ephesians with its central theme of grace and universal belonging through God in Christ.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Create a definition of "grace" based on your own life experience. Use just a few words or sentences.
2. How much does God resemble a judging authority figure for you? How much does God resemble a loving, compassionate parent?
3. When, most recently, have you noticed your mind rushing to judgment of

yourself or another person? What do you judge yourself most for? What do you judge others most for?

GOD IS GRACIOUS.

■ **Read:** Ephesians 1:1-14

*The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.*
(Psalm 145:8-9)

Paul began every letter he wrote with "Grace to you and peace" or "Grace, mercy, and peace" as a greeting for his readers. What does this tell us about Paul as a person and a pastor? We modern readers often find Paul arrogant or confusing, but the people who received his letters—even if they sometimes thought he was bossy or boring (see Acts 20:9 about the young man who fell out of a window, asleep from Paul's long sermon!)—loved his words and teachings enough that they saved his letters and passed them along to others. Today, we read and study Paul not because Paul held onto his own writings, but because his readers did. They experienced God's love and grace in his work.

In fact, people loved Paul's letters so much that other teachers and pastors tried to imitate him. You might think of this along the same lines as today's "fan fiction." Fan fiction is where readers who love Harry Potter or Jane Austen are so enthusiastic that they compose their own fiction, continuing the characters and storylines of the original novels. In ancient times, it was considered a mark of respect and honor to write as though you were speaking for your beloved teacher or mentor. Most scholars believe Ephesians is a letter like that, written to imitate and continue the teachings of Paul, as are Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and

Titus. The language in these letters is different from that of the letters we know Paul wrote—letters like Galatians, 1 Corinthians and others. That said, it is important to note that all the New Testament letters we read today we have only because they were valued enough to be preserved and passed down by people in the early church.

One of the reasons this letter to the Ephesians may have been treasured is that it opens with a beautiful, poetic litany, marveling at God’s graciousness in inviting us to belong to God and to one another in Christ. Even today, these words can lift your spirit and warm your heart. If you’ve ever imagined God as a disapproving, distant judge, Ephesians 1:1-14 offers a different image: God who is generous, warm and welcoming.

When I was a young pastor, I combined these two images of God into something very confusing: I imagined that God was generous, warm and welcoming, but also that God judged me when I was not generous, warm and welcoming in a divinely perfect, constant and completely unrealistic way. As a human being, I could not be as gracious as God. Under the strain of trying, I probably came across to my parishioners as anxious, strung out and exhausted, trying to be so loving and available all the time. I did some damage to myself, not letting myself ever rest or say no to things people asked me to do. I had to learn to believe that a loving God invited me not to *be* God, but to *be loved by* God—and so, to be myself and a human being.

Ephesians was written to a community of Gentiles who were afraid God didn’t accept them. They worried they didn’t truly belong to God’s family because they were not Jewish like Jesus, the apostles, and Paul. So, in this letter, we hear that the nature of God in Christ is not a test but a gift... not discrimination but hospitality... not exclusion but belonging! The writer wants Gentiles to know they are invited to be themselves and to live into a meaningful relationship with God—not because

they have passed a test, but through God’s grace. We belong to God, not because of who we are or aren’t, or what we do or don’t do, but because of who *God* is and what *God* does.

We could read this passage as a historic piece: a message to early Christians wondering if they really were accepted into the Body of Christ. But we can also read it as a letter written to *us*, because we all sometimes wonder if God really does love and accept us just as we are. We read these words as a living testimony about a loving God who invites us into relationship, grace and belonging—just like the Gentiles of Ephesus.

LECTIO DIVINA (“DIVINE READING”)

📖 **Read:** Ephesians 1:3-14

Read to yourself or ask someone in your small group to read to everyone. Take it slowly. Hear the words as a prayer speaking to you about who God is. You might read it twice or even three times. (Small groups can ask a different person to read it each time.) Notice if a certain phrase or word in particular catches your attention.

Share aloud or reflect:

4. What did you feel, listening to these words about who God is? What was it like to hear the words read aloud?
5. What word or phrase caught your attention? How might God be speaking to you through that word or phrase today?

GIVING THANKS FOR ONE ANOTHER.

📖 **Read:** Ephesians 1:15-23

[Give] thanks to God the Father at all times

and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:20-21)

Paul loved to tell people how thankful he was for them! In all his letters, he writes beautiful thank-you messages, which we see imitated by the writer of Ephesians. Sometimes Paul could sound arrogant and harsh, but he was full of gratitude and appreciation for his coworkers and congregants (which may be part of why they put up with his weaknesses and welcomed his visits and letters to them). These practices can still grow grace and goodwill in churches, families and communities today. It's important to express gratitude aloud, to appreciate the gifts of others, and to appreciate your own gifts. The more grace we offer to one another, the more grace we feel in ourselves and all around us.

The letter to the Ephesians offers a prayer of thanksgiving for all its readers. In fact, the writer says passionately: "I do not cease to give thanks for you..." (1:16) What if we repeatedly said things like this to one another in our churches? In my first congregation, volunteers did everything. As with many small churches, many people pitched in to keep things working — Sunday school, building maintenance, kitchen cleanup, yard work, food pantry, you name it. The culture of the congregation was to accept that this was "the way it was." We couldn't afford more staff, so people had to step up.

A change began to occur, however, when we started to say "thank you" publicly. At the board meeting each month, we chose eight to 10 people to thank in the newsletter. At the end of the year, we gave silly awards to people to thank them for notable volunteer work they had done. Those awards included: "passion" tea for our passionate treasurer, a can of creamed corn for "cream of the crop" work on a project, a toilet plunger with ribbons for someone who had tackled a sewage disaster. We tried to say thank you to each other as a joyful habit and to

have fun doing it. Something changed in the culture of our congregation. We found grace and lightheartedness to share with one another alongside the hardworking hands and hours of service we gave to our church.

Part of saying thank you is not only the words, but seeing someone for who they are and wanting the best for them. Which, in the case of a church volunteer, means giving someone permission to step down if they need to. Being part of a congregation is about feeling loved as a whole person, which means being invited to grow and change. In Ephesians, not only does the writer's prayer recognize the faith, love and service of the people, but the writer prays for them to grow: in wisdom, in God's call for their life, and in knowing that God's power is working in them. Grace is about gratitude, but also, growth and freedom.

The prayer we've read is for an ancient congregation of Gentiles in Ephesus, but it can also be a prayer for us today. It may feel strange to imagine you are hearing someone praising your faith and "love for the saints." But I encourage you to believe that this is all true about you—because it probably is. If you are reading this Bible study, you are engaging with your faith in Jesus Christ and your love for your fellow Christians!

LECTIO DIVINA ("DIVINE READING")

■ **Read:** Ephesians 1:15-23. (Or vv. 15-19, if time is short.)

Listen to each word as a prayer to God, just for you. If it is strange to imagine an ancient person you have never met giving thanks for you, try picturing someone else, like a special teacher, grandparent or elder, speaking this prayer over you instead. To really hear it, you might pray this twice, or even three times if you have time. (In a small group, ask a different person to read it each time.)

Share aloud or reflect:

6. What word or phrase caught your attention? How might God be speaking to you today about grace through that phrase or word?
7. Who did you imagine praying this prayer over you? In what way did that person's voice or presence help you to think about grace?

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

 **Read:** Ephesians 2:1-22

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

For me, there was never a “before” and “after” in being a Christian. I was baptized as a 5-month-old baby in a white, clapboard Presbyterian church in southern Indiana, where my grandparents were members. I grew up in a church that looked like a fortress built of pink sandstone in the city of Chicago. It was a mainline, multiracial community of loving people who made church feel like a special and safe place to be. Until I became an adult, I was unaware of someone whose life had been brought from death to life because they joined a church or became a Christian. I did not know many examples of a “before” and “after” or an “old self” and “new self” in Christ. As a child, I was unfamiliar with the evangelical concept of “being saved.”

The readers of the letter to the Ephesians lived in a time when to become a Christian meant a “before” and “after.” You were “in,” or you were “out.” If you were a Gentile, this was a dramatic jump: You were considered an unclean pagan, outside

the Jewish faith of Jesus. Today some Christians continue in a belief that people are in or out, saved or unsaved. But in Ephesians, there is no mention of people going to hell or heaven, just that people are dead or alive, saved or lost, circumcised or uncircumcised, divided or made one. Being alive and saved, here, means being a part of the Body of Christ. It means belonging to a church community and living a new life in Christ. (Later on in Ephesians, we'll hear more about what new life in Christ looks like.)

If we as believers do not feel that we were “dead,” excluded or condemned before we became Christian, how can we understand a sentence in Ephesians like, “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived” (2:1-2)? Perhaps instead we can read this letter through the lens of a gap I experience every day: the space that exists between the “me” who feels “dead” because of the mistakes, regrets, fears and sins I fall into, and the “me” God is inviting to be “alive” by choosing to love, forgive, let go of fear and persist in following Jesus. Part of me, each day, has died in Christ, and part of me, each day, is made alive in Christ. But coming alive is not something I can do alone. It is a gift of my faith, which itself is a gift of the Holy Spirit: to believe in and live into the grace God offers me each day so I can let go and begin again.

I have a loud inner critic: a voice inside my head that criticizes me for what I'm doing and not doing. As I write this, I am going through a divorce, which is amicable, but still so hard. I have noticed that what my critic finds most fault with is not the divorce, but my failure years ago to financially plan for the possibility of divorce. Of course, I could not have known and did not plan to be divorced, so being upset with myself about it is pretty useless. Focusing my heart away from the critical voice and instead upon God's grace helps me let go of my guilt and regret. With grace, I can open my hands to the next chapter of my life and the ways God will be

meeting me, even though I feel unprepared and uncertain.

In Eastern religions, prayer often involves a “mantra,” which in Sanskrit means “a tool for the mind.” When I hear my inner critic start to say negative things to me, I pray mantras that focus on grace, like: “God is love,” “God is full of compassion and mercy,” and “Come, Holy Spirit.” I may also say phrases such as: “It’s going to be OK,” “You can do this,” and “This is not a big deal.” Instead of attempting to stop my inner critic by once again criticizing myself, I try to fill my mind with loving words. This is a practice of grace: speaking to my sins and weaknesses with words of love and mercy instead of judgment and scolding, even as I seek to do better and “sin no more.” Despite all the ways I imagine I have failed, God and Jesus still reach out to me. Ephesians tells me that I am part of the Body of Christ, regardless, built along with my fellow Christians into a dwelling place for God.

Share aloud or reflect:

8. Did you grow up believing that people were either saved or unsaved, “in” or “out” of God’s favor and love? What was that like? Even if you did not grow up that way, what does such a belief seem to say about God? Are there other ways you believe that people are either “in” or “out,” good or bad, right or wrong? What would it be like to gentle some of those judgments in yourself?
9. What are some things you tend to criticize yourself for? On a piece of paper, write out at least two or three mantras you could use as tools of prayer for your own mind. Consider using words from scripture, a hymn, or a phrase that is meaningful to you.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of all, you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. You have compassion over all that you have made. Help us to believe in the gift of your grace, that we may live with open hands to all the ways you meet us in life. Amen. 🌸

Receiving grace

Session one

Is grace real?

BY HEIDI HAVERKAMP

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the first session of Gather's fall Bible study series on the Letter to the Ephesians. In this three-part study, we'll explore whether grace is real (September), how God's power works in us (October), and grace-filled living, ancient and new (November).

OPENING AND CLOSING RITUALS

If you don't already start your Bible study sessions with a ritual, I encourage you to try it, even just for two or three meetings. A ritual can be a gentle way to mark the start or close of spending time together as friends in Christ. Feel free to try some (or all) of the suggestions below or come up with your own.

Opening rituals

- Open a Bible to the first page of that night's passage and leave it open on the table or in a special place in the room.
- Ring a bell or a singing bowl.
- Light a candle.
- Pause together for 10-15 seconds.
- Invite each person to share one word as a "temperature check" for how they are doing that day.
- Ask someone to read aloud the focus verse for the day.
- Sing the hymn for the day, or just 1-2 verses.

Closing rituals

- Ring a bell or a singing bowl.
- Blow out the candle if you lit one.

- Ask for prayer intentions.
- Pause together for 10-15 seconds.
- Say the Lord's Prayer together.
- Read the focus verse aloud.
- Sing the hymn for the day or the final 1-2 verses.
- Close the Bible if you opened it.

WHAT IS LECTIO DIVINA?

Lectio divina is an ancient monastic way of studying the Bible, used before everyone could read, much less have their own Bible. In lectio divina, we read a scripture passage aloud four times. However, for this Ephesians study, we will only read a passage two or three times since the passages we are using are longer.

The traditional *lectio divina* has four stages of listening, described below. While most groups will not have time to do all four stages, you might encourage participants to try these at home:

1. LECTIO ("Read"): Read slowly and attentively, two or three times. Simply hear the words. What word or phrase grabs your attention?
2. MEDITATIO ("Meditate"): What is going on behind the word or phrase that you chose? Go deeper. What is speaking to you here?
3. ORATIO ("Pray"): Respond. Where does this lead you in your own life? What are you moved to offer or say to God?
4. CONTEMPLATIO ("Contemplate"): Take it to heart. Does a response from God seem to reveal itself to you? What do you walk away with?

PAUL OF TARSUS: SOME BASICS

What was Paul like? Here is a description from "The Acts of Paul and Thecla," written 100 years after Paul's death, but likely based on memories of him that were passed down:

... a man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with

eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness; for now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel.

Even though the four gospels appear in our Bibles before the epistles, Paul wrote his letters decades before the authors of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John wrote their accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Some epistles say they are from Paul, but were likely written by some of his disciples because of how much the language and themes vary from letters we are certain Paul wrote himself. Here's a breakdown:

Paul certainly wrote these letters:

- Romans
- 1 Corinthians
- 2 Corinthians (probably several letters in one)
- Galatians
- Philippians
- 1 Thessalonians
- Philemon

Paul's disciples probably wrote these letters:

- Ephesians
- Colossians

Paul's disciples certainly wrote these letters:

- 2 Thessalonians
- 1 Timothy
- 2 Timothy
- Titus

CARING CONVERSATIONS

When speaking of Paul's time in jail, this study includes a reflection question that invites participants to share whether they or a loved one has experienced imprisonment. Before this discussion, make it clear that participants will:

1. be invited, but not required to share personal stories.
2. listen to other participants' stories without corrections or judgments.

3. commit to not sharing the stories of others outside of this group discussion.

If group members do not share personal stories, leaders could instead read the following:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young German Lutheran pastor and theologian, was sent to a Gestapo prison in 1943 for working against the Nazi regime. Before his execution in 1945, he prayed and wrote letters to friends and family. Here is one excerpt:

Viewed from a Christian perspective, Christmas in a prison cell can, of course, hardly be considered particularly problematic. Most likely many of those here in this building will celebrate a more meaningful and authentic Christmas than in places where it is celebrated in name only. That misery, sorrow, poverty, loneliness, helplessness, and guilt mean something quite different in the eyes of God than according to human judgment; that God turns toward the very places from which humans turn away; that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn — a prisoner grasps this better than others, and for him this is truly good news. —from Letters and Papers from Prison: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Reader's Edition (Fortress Press 2015), p. 205.

TIPS FOR SHORTENING THIS STUDY

Option 1: Do the opening prayer and sing 1-2 verses of the opening hymn. Read the "Introduction." Do Q1, Q2 and Q3 in small groups of two or three. Read "God is gracious," and its lectio divina exercise. Do either Q4 or Q5. Close with prayer.

Option 2: Do the opening prayer and sing 1-2 verses of the opening hymn. Read "God is gracious" and its lectio divina exercise. Do either Q4 or Q5. Read "From death to life." Do Q 8 with 1-2 partners, and do Q9 by yourself, writing on paper. Close with prayer. 🌿