

#### OPENING HYMN

“Will You Come and Follow Me”  
(ELW 798, verses 1, 4 and 5)

#### OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, who is above all and through all and in all, teach us to have courage, boldness and confidence through our faith in Christ, so that we will believe that your power working in us through the Spirit is always inviting us to love and heal the world. Amen.

#### FOCUS VERSE

“[God’s] power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”  
(Ephesians 3:20)

#### MATERIALS NEEDED

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

# Receiving grace: A study of Ephesians

## Session two

God’s power works in us

BY HEIDI HAVERKAMP

### GRACE CAN LEAD TO HOPE.

■ **Read:** Ephesians 3:1-13

*Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10)*

The only time I’ve been inside a prison was when I was in middle school. A Sunday school teacher arranged for our class to tour the county jail as part of a lesson about Matthew 25. We were five gawky preteen girls of different heights and races. A prison chaplain took us and our teachers to peek through a window at a cavernous hallway of cells on two levels. We sat down with some guys who warned us about the consequences of breaking the law, which was a bit lost on us middle-class church girls. Still, the feel of the inside of the jail, and the sight of all those men crowded together in such a violent, ugly place, has remained with me.

What’s the first thing you think of when you hear “St. Paul”? Just a guess: probably not his prison time. However, we know from the book of Acts and Paul’s letters that the apostle was arrested and went to jail many times. Paul regularly got into trouble with the authorities for his beliefs and what was considered troublesome behavior—much like Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer and many protesters

today. And as with King and Bonhoeffer, jail didn't stop Paul from writing. While behind bars, he wrote a letter to the Philippians, to Philemon, and probably other letters not passed down to us.

One description the writer of Ephesians has “Paul” use for himself is “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (3:1). Being a prisoner then—as now—was not something most people would have been proud of. But this writer considered Paul's identity as a prisoner to be just as important as being a Christian, preacher, apostle and saint. It is key to Paul's “job description” in Ephesians 3:1-13, and again in 4:1 at the very start of the letter's famous, beautiful call to unity in the Body of Christ. Why would this be?

We often try to hide the terrible things that have happened to us. But what if grace invites us to name some of those terrible things as sources of strength and wisdom in our lives? Some of the most miraculous stories in Acts are of Paul escaping from prison or converting his jailers. His imprisonment was proof of his fearlessness and determination, showing that what was most important to him was not his own honor or safety, but the gospel of Jesus Christ. For Paul, identifying as a prisoner was a marker not of shame, but of honor and great love.

One of the most terrible things to ever happen to me was my mother's sudden death, during cancer treatment, when I was 40. Early one Sunday, before I was supposed to preach, my father called and told us she had collapsed in the middle of the night. She was in the ICU, still alive, but unconscious and failing. Time seemed to stop. I remember the senior pastor saying he would preach for me. (My sermon for that day still sits on my computer, unpreached). My husband and I rushed to the hospital. We were able to be with her when she died. My mother and I were close. Losing her was losing part of myself. The grief was profound, affecting my mind and body in ways I'd never experienced before.

Days after her death, still in shock from the loss, I remembered friends who had also lost their mothers,

five, 10, even 20 years before. I had felt sad when I'd heard their tragic news then. Now, having lost a parent myself, I realized the depth of grief they must have been experiencing. I miss my mother every day. Yet because I lost her, my heart has grown bigger with compassion and sympathy for any person who suffers the death of someone close to them. The day she died was a terrible day. But it was also a day that made more room for love within me, a contradiction that remains a mystery to me.

In the song “Anthem,” Leonard Cohen sings: “There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in.” What if the holes in our hearts make more room for God's power to act through us? Some of the most painful things that happen to us can become the most powerful ways we touch the lives of others. As Christians, we believe that through Christ, suffering and death can lead to resurrection. Through grace and the perspective of God's love, what seemed terrible or shameful to us can become a strength and a blessing.

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

1. Have you or has someone you love ever been imprisoned? If you are comfortable doing so, share that experience. How does Paul's time in prison change how you think about him? How do you think it may have affected who he was as a pastor and a follower of Jesus?
2. What do you think of this question asked by news anchor Anderson Cooper in an interview about grief: “Can we learn to love the things we most wish had never happened?” Can you remember a terrible experience that also enlarged or deepened your life (or the life of someone you love) in a way you did not expect? How has a damaging

experience helped you to have more compassion for other people?

## A PRAYER FOR GOD'S GRACE

📖 **Read:** Ephesians 3:14-21

*How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!* (Psalm 119:103)

Have you ever heard someone pray aloud for someone else, where the prayer was not so much a blessing or an intercession as it was a passive-aggressive nudge about what the pray-er thinks the pray-ee should do or feel or know? Sometimes prayers can be words of judgment or meddling advice, disguised in holy clothes.

This prayer of a disciple of Paul is not that. It is one of the famous and beautiful passages that has made Ephesians a favorite text for so many Christians. Like music or art, the words of scripture can lead our minds to awe, wonder and other powerful emotions. These words remind us that the Bible doesn't only tell us what faith can *mean* but how faith can *feel*: that creation is good and that we are beloved in the eyes of God.

When I was in college, I organized a "Bible poetry night" for my campus ministry group. We read aloud to one another our favorite verses of scripture. All those words felt like prayers. We didn't discuss them; we just enjoyed how they made us feel. Fyodor Dostoevsky, a Christian, said through the main character of his novel *The Idiot*, "I believe the world will be saved by beauty." The way beauty makes us feel can be a pathway that leads us more fully into the beauty, love and grace of God.

Grace is a beautiful mystery. Because of this, we do not receive or understand it the way we want to. Like love, grace can sneak up on us. Sometimes, as with many things in life, we have to ask God for help—for grace. Nancy, an elderly parishioner,

taught me this. To me, Nancy seemed so wise and faithful. Yet she told me that she felt clueless and helpless on a regular basis! Nancy would tell me: "Some days, Rev. Heidi, I just can't do it. I can't function or be normal or figure out my life. And so, I pray, 'Jesus, today I need you to do it for me.' And he does."

I often forget that I can ask God not just to help the people I love, but to help me too. This doesn't mean giving up and doing nothing for myself. This means that that I can place a problem, a longing or a confusion into God's hands for a while. At times, I'm better able to see the grace that comes from God when I get out of the way for a while. Some people say it this way: "Let go and let God" or "Give it to Jesus." When we are struggling with how to comprehend or receive grace, prayers like these wait for us, giving us words to ask God to help us.

Believing in grace means believing we are worthy of God's help. It means believing that we, like God, are beautiful and special, because we are created in God's image. Ephesians 3:14-17 is a prayer we can turn to for assurance that we are not separate from God... that the Holy Spirit is at work within us... and that Christ dwells in our hearts. It is not only that we are called to dwell in Christ, but that Christ dwells within us too! Is this easy or difficult for you to believe? Perhaps, if you are like me, it depends on the day.

Near the end of this prayer, we hear that God's "power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20). Here, again, are wisdom and grace, such that we don't have to do everything ourselves. We do not have to earn, figure out or accomplish everything in this life all alone. Sometimes we need to get out of the way so the Holy Spirit can direct us and work through us. Anxiety, over-thinking, fear and perfectionism can all get in our way because we are only human.

A friend of mine asked God to do something

for her. She was a white woman longing to have a more racially diverse group of friends. She didn't know how to go about this, so she turned to prayer. She told God what she was longing for and how it connected to her dream of the reign of God here on earth. For weeks, she continued to offer this prayer. After a couple of months, she found herself chatting with some parents of her children's friends—two women of color. They discovered they had things in common. Those two friends led to other friends. Soon they had a small group of white and Black women who started a book group. In the years since, they have gotten involved in community issues and antiracism work. They also share mutual encouragement for their parenting and spiritual lives.

God's power is there for all of us. God wants to work through us and for us! God can do more, if we ask, than we could ever do alone—indeed, more than we can ask or imagine. This too is grace—that God's power is available to us simply for the asking, although it may not work exactly the way we might think or predict. In fact, as Ephesians tells us, it will do more!

#### LECTIO DIVINA

📖 **Read:** Ephesians 3:14-21

Read these verses to yourself. Or ask one or two group members to each read them aloud once. Listen to each word as a prayer to God, just for you. If you have time, pray it twice or even three times, to really hear it.

#### Share aloud or reflect:

3. What did you notice about how the words of this prayer made you feel?
4. What word or phrase caught your attention? How might God be speaking

to you today about grace, through that word or phrase?

5. How could this prayer speak to you about the relationship of grace to God's power? What might God's grace-filled power be inviting you to imagine or risk in your own life right now?

#### THE GRACE OF BELONGING TO ONE ANOTHER

📖 **Read:** Ephesians 4:1-16

*Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.*  
(1 Corinthians 12:14-15)

"Hell is other people," French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre said. Along those same lines, writer Kathleen Norris describes how a reporter once asked a Benedictine monk if the hardest part of his vowed life was being celibate. The monk responded that the hardest part was actually "the other monks." In another example, a friend once told me that she and her extended family get together at Christmas for two days—no more, no less—so that afterward, "we still love each other!" We can probably all relate to this, whether we're with family, church, coworkers or even our dearest friends. "People bump into each other," as my therapist once put it to me. It is human nature.

Yet it is also true that the most common way God's grace comes into our lives is through the presence and love of other people. God's love is revealed to us through the love and belonging we feel in our relationships. This is one of Paul's core teachings—that we are the Body of Christ, and through Jesus, we are all members of one another. We remain individuals, but we also belong to each other

through Christ and through the church. We do not have to earn this belonging; we are baptized into it. Whenever we receive communion, confess our sins and gather together, we are reminded of this truth. Even if we don't always like each other, we belong to one another in Christ.

As I have often told congregation members, this is one of the gifts of worshipping together. We don't have to like or understand all the people who sit around us in church. To feel God's presence together, we can simply sing, pray, listen, receive communion, gaze on the cross and otherwise be together. Again, being members of one another doesn't mean we don't annoy or get on each other's nerves sometimes. But it does mean that we are called to respect and treat each another, as Ephesians says, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:2-3).

In the congregations I served, there were some personalities I struggled with more than others. I realized that I found them difficult because they were so different from me. I discovered that if I focused instead on respecting or even appreciating that difference—in other words, if I could recognize that God had given them gifts and skills different from mine—this let me see us as part of the one Body working together, rather than separate members who were annoying to each other. The thing is, there is no one right way to be a church member or a Christian. We all have our own gifts. We are all made unique. We all can make the church a better, more abundant place to be together.

That does not mean we should ignore bad behavior or people who do damaging things in the community. Ephesians calls us to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (4:1) and to "[speak] the truth in love" (v. 15). The Body can become unhealthy, and it is part of our call to seek help, accountability and reconciliation when needed. The Body of Christ cannot be left on

automatic pilot. We are "joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is *working properly*, [promoting] the body's growth in building itself up in love" (4:16).

How can we live together as a church, amid all our differences? Grace and belonging are interrelated because they interrupt judgment. When we see that we, though different, are one in the Body of Christ, we can let go of our critical thoughts and focus on being the church together. This what the writer of Ephesians means by saying, "The gifts [Christ] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (4:11-12).

Ephesians goes on to say that this body-building effort will go on "until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (4:13). There are many ways to grow into the full stature of Christ. In church, we can serve as musicians, cleanup crew, treasurers, lectors, ushers, cooks or bakers, artists, child or youth teachers, parish nurses, activists, organizers, encouragers, listeners...and we can make the list even longer. Many people make the church and the world a better place, in many ways. All are needed, honorable and blessed by God.

Sometimes we need grace, just to see that our gifts, too, are holy and special to God. We are all equipped to grow into the full stature of Christ, in all our different ways. And as Ephesians reminds us, we can only grow into the full stature of Christ *together*, not as separate individuals. Let's listen to the emphasis in that verse again: "until *all of us* come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (4:13). We are all created in God's image. Yet God is vast, so human beings exist in a myriad of forms. Our gifts make us special as individuals. Our gifts also bring us together in

community. God's power works through us and our gifts, beyond what we can ask or imagine.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

6. What gifts has God given you? How well do you appreciate your own gifts? Very often, we dismiss what we are good at as “nothing special” or not as interesting as what someone else can do. In your small group, help to identify each other's gifts: First, ask each person to print their name atop a piece of paper. Next, participants will pass each paper around the circle, to each person. Everyone will write one or two gifts they have experienced in the person whose name is at the top. Keep passing the sheets (in the same direction) until everyone has written on each sheet, and you get your paper back. This can be a surprising, grace-filled exercise. You might want to have tissues ready!
  
7. (Do not do this question at the same time as #6, to avoid the papers getting confused. This question is for your personal reflection only, and not to be shared with others). Bring to mind someone who is difficult for you. Do not write any names. Write down a few ways that they annoy you. Then write down things that you appreciate in this person. (Ask yourself: What are they good at? What skills do they bring to God's kingdom that you do not have?) Now consider: how do the two of you balance or complement each other as members of the Body of Christ?

**CLOSING PRAYER**

God of all, your power working in us, is doing more, even now, than we can ask or imagine. Your grace works in us, even when we don't see or feel it. Help us to know the gifts you give us, so we may be who you created us to be, as members of the Body of Christ in your church and in the world. Amen. 🌿

# Receiving grace

## Session two

God's power works in us.

BY HEIDI HAVERKAMP

### OVERVIEW

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

### WAYS TO ENHANCE THIS STUDY

1. **Allow for silence.** As a leader, feel free to allow small pauses and moments of silence. Spending some silent moments together can help participants settle into what they have heard, as the Holy Spirit stirs your hearts and minds. A leader who is calm and comfortable with silence enables group members to let go of any anxiety because “no one is talking.” Silence can be a space for God to enter, a space for divine inspiration, guidance and easing any tension in our conversations.

2. **Make other Christian history connections.** Tell your group about the three imprisoned Christian thinkers below. (If time allows, consider sharing a few paragraphs from the writings of each.)

- John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress* (first published in 1678): Bunyan's book, one of the most popular in history, was begun in prison. Bunyan was serving time for “rogue preaching” or preaching as a nonconformist minister—in other words, outside of the Church of England—which was illegal in 17th-century Britain.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Fortress Press 2015):

Bonhoeffer wrote some of his most influential theological writings from 1943 to 1945, when he was jailed by the Gestapo.

- Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (Penguin Modern, 2018): King wrote his most famous letter in 1963, while serving time in jail in Alabama for peacefully protesting. He was writing to white clergy and leaders who criticized him for wanting to move “too fast” to end segregation.

3. **Visit or connect with people in prison.** Jesus says in Matthew 25, “I was in prison and you visited me.” When we visit, write to or care for incarcerated people, we encounter the face of Christ and enter more deeply into relationship with him.

- Volunteer with prison ministry. This is not for everyone. It requires a certain level of commitment, as well as following certain rules and regulations. To learn more, visit [www.prisoncongregations.org/resources](http://www.prisoncongregations.org/resources), which offers ways to volunteer, write elected representatives about the concerns of incarcerated people, and assist newly-released, returning citizens.

- Consider gifting copies of a prison prayer book. Find out if an ELCA chaplain or minister who visits the prison, jail or detention center in your community could use copies of *Hear My Voice: A Prison Prayer Book* (Augsburg Fortress 2019). A Spanish-language version, *Oye Mi Voz*, is also available for purchase. Learn more at: <https://go.augsburgfortress.org/hear-my-voice-a-prison-prayer-book>.

4. **Provide information and education around leadership and volunteer opportunities at the**

**congregational, synodical and churchwide levels.** Part of serving together as the Body of Christ involves volunteering and sharing in the leadership of your church. It's important to note that volunteering is a responsibility of church members, but it does not mean giving up the right to have feelings, boundaries and integrity. Here is a helpful list that has been passed around churches for years:

### SHORTEN THIS STUDY (30-45 MINUTES)

#### Option 1:

- Do the opening prayer and sing 1-2 verses of the opening hymn.
- Skip all the *lectio divina* exercises.
- Read "Grace can lead to hope through hard times."

- Do Q1 and Q2.
- Read "The grace of belonging to one another."
- Do Q6 and Q7.
- Close with prayer.

#### Option 2:

- Do the opening prayer and sing 1-2 verses of the opening hymn.
- Read "A prayer for God's grace," and its *lectio divina* exercise.
- Do Q4 or Q5.
- Read "The grace of belonging to one another."
- Do Q6 and Q7.
- Close with prayer. 🌿

### 15 RIGHTS FOR CHURCH VOLUNTEERS AND LEADERS

1. I do not have to feel guilty just because someone else does not like what I do, say, think or feel.
2. It is OK for me to feel angry and to express it in responsible ways.
3. I do not have to assume full responsibility for making decisions, particularly where others share responsibility for making the decision.
4. I have the right to say, "I don't know."
5. I have the right to say, "No," without feeling guilty.
6. I have the right to say, "I don't understand," without feeling stupid.
7. I do not have to apologize or give reasons when I say, "No."
8. I have the right to ask others to do things for me.
9. I have the right to refuse requests that others make of me.
10. I have the right to tell others when I think they are manipulating, conning or treating me unfairly.
11. I have the right to refuse additional responsibilities without feeling guilty.
12. I have the right to tell others when their behavior offends or distracts me.
13. I do not have to compromise my personal integrity.
14. I have the right to make mistakes and to be responsible for them; I have the right to be wrong.
15. I do not have to be liked, admired or respected by everyone for everything I do.