

Small Community Notes – Part One

Overview of the term – Ephesians: The Confident Christian Life

Date	Passage	Title	Notes
Apr 14	Ephesians 1:1-14	Introduction & overview	
Apr 21	Ephesians 1:1-14	Confident of purpose	
Apr 28	Ephesians 1:15-23	Confident of authority	
May 5	Ephesians 2:1-10	Confident of destiny	
May 12	Ephesians 2:11-22	Confident of family	Generosity Sunday
May 19	Ephesians 3:1-13	Confident of inheritance	Pentecost Annual Church Family Meeting
May 26	Ephesians 3:14-21	Confident of love	1 st Sunday half term
Jun 2	All In – Gathering led by Emelye and youth		2 nd Sunday half term Child Baptism / Dedication
Jun 9	Ephesians 4:1-16	Confident of calling	
Jun 16	Ephesians 4:1-16	Confident of equipping	
Jun 23	Ephesians 4:17-32	Confident of victory	
Jun 30	Ephesians 5:1-20	Confident in the Spirit	
Jul 7	Ephesians 5:21-33	Confident in relationships	Adult Baptisms
Jul 14	Ephesians 6:1-9	Confident in relationships	
Jul 21	Ephesians 6:10-24	Confident in battle	

Introduction to Ephesians

Ephesus in the New Testament

Ephesus makes 3 main appearances in the New Testament

- in Acts 18 – 20 (see below)
- in Revelation 2, Ephesus is one of the 7 churches to which the Spirit of God 'dictates' a letter via the pen of John
- the letter of Paul to the church in Ephesus, the subject of our summer preaching series

Ephesus is also referenced in 1 Corinthians and 1 & 2 Timothy.

The founding of the church in Ephesus

It will be helpful to read Luke's account in Acts 18:18 – 20:38. In summary

- Paul arrived in Ephesus sometime in AD 52, during his 2nd Missionary Journey
- He was accompanied by a couple named Aquila & Priscilla who he'd met in Corinth the previous year – he left them there when he moved on and they played a key role in the new Christian community in Ephesus: in particular, they took Apollos under their wing and mentored him into one of that church's key teachers
- Paul returned to Ephesus the following year (AD 53) on his 3rd missionary journey (Acts 19:1), finding a handful of believers who'd not yet received the Holy Spirit (Apollos, the church's main apologist in Ephesus, *knew only the baptism of John [the Baptist]* – Acts 18:25)
- Paul stayed longer in Ephesus than in any other community, and when he did move on again, left his faithful companion Timothy in charge of the Ephesian church
- According to tradition, John took over from Timothy towards the end of the first century, thus establishing the relationship between the apostle and the seven churches to which Jesus commanded him to write at the very end of his life.

What sort of city was Ephesus?

You can read a fuller account on pages 23 – 24. In summary

- Ephesus was huge, the fourth largest city in the world after Antioch, Alexandria and Rome itself.
- 'The market of Asia,' Ephesus was by far Asia's most important city and one of the 'free' cities, a privileged status granted for services to the Empire
- It boasted fabulous architecture, notably a seventy foot *wide* road lined with pillars which led from the centre of the city down to the harbour; a 25,000-seater theatre / stadium, and the awesome Temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world: the largest building in the world at the time, it was also the first to be constructed entirely of marble

Life in Ephesus (and the other cities of the Greco-Roman world) presents striking similarities with our own culture:

- a melting pot of cultures, races, beliefs
- materialistic, humanistic yet with veneer of spirituality / bewildering variety of philosophies, ways of life, and religions
- affluence leading to self-importance
- an appearance of stability (travel, living standards), yet beneath the veneer of affluence and sophistication people were tense and anxious about the future, feelings exacerbated by political upheaval & violent uprisings
- a 'spiritual smorgasbord' – countless Greco-Roman gods and goddesses / rival shrines and temples vied for business on almost every street corner

Above all, the overarching cult of the Roman Emperor set Christians seriously out of step with the powers of the state. The Romans didn't care who their people worshipped at home or in public, provided their first loyalty was to the state.

Christians were accused of 'atheism' because their refusal to accept that Jesus was simply one among many equal spiritual options was deemed to be a denial of the gods; and assailed on all sides by the all-pervading atmosphere of paganism, syncretism & materialism; accompanied by temptations – sex, alcohol and money – which are still familiar today.

Week One – 14 to 20 April Introduction & Overview

Ephesians 1:1-14

Of all the themes we could pick, Paul seems especially eager to remind his readers of the call to Unity.

Paul emphasises throughout Ephesians that Christians are, theologically & spiritually, one in Christ; and impresses upon us that this reality is to govern and shape the way that we live and relate to one another. In essence, Paul explains

- the theological & spiritual basis and consequences of salvation
- what it means to be church & what church looks like – in a nutshell, how we are to live with and for one another
- that to be a Christian is to be engaged in spiritual warfare

In **Chapter 1**, Paul gives one of the most beautiful expositions of the Christian gospel. Layer upon layer of theological imagery is arranged to demonstrate that our salvation is wholly God's initiative, pleasure and purpose. All Christians are blessed, chosen, predestined, adopted, and sealed with the Spirit. We all share the gifts of redemption, forgiveness and an eternal inheritance.

Chapter 2 begins with a specific focus on grace as the means of salvation. He stresses the grim reality of humanity's unregenerate condition, how utterly hopeless our position is without Christ; and then rams home the point that all we have received in Him is a free gift. No boasting! He moves on to examine how this plays out in human reconciliation and Christian unity by means of a case study in Jewish/Gentile relations.

Chapter 3 develops this theme, and shows how the gospel unites all Christ's followers in an indissoluble global fellowship, the church. This church is to be the vehicle for the proclamation of the glorious gospel both to the ends of the earth and within the heavenly realms. Paul explodes into prayer for his readers – beseeching God to overturn the treasure chest of heaven upon us, that we might share a unified knowledge of God's love.

Chapter 4 is one of the most wonderful New Testament descriptions of what church should look like. We learn that Unity is a pre-ordained gift of the Spirit, and why it is vital that we nurture and promote it. We learn that every member has a place, purpose and role, and that the Church can only fulfil its calling if each individual's gift is released into ministry. We learn that Christian maturity is pursued by mutually building one another up in our respective ministries. Paul then begins to spell out – in simple, practical application – the moral and relational requirements of this new way of seeing one another.

Chapter 5 & the first half of **Chapter 6** continues Paul's exploration of the practical, every-day outworking of what he calls 'living in the Light'. We are to take care how we live and how we treat one another. Having established the core principle of mutual submission, Paul goes on to examine how this plays out within the marriage relationship, within families and in socio-economic relationships.

Ephesians concludes with a stirring call to arms; a vital reminder that our enemies are not our fellow human beings, but rather the spiritual hosts of darkness which wreak corruption and destruction upon humanity. Poignantly taking as his illustration the daily uniform of the guards to whom he was probably chained as he wrote, Paul lists the spiritual armour each Christian needs for this most desperate and consequential of wars. Christians are to stake our ground and hold it firm against all assaults of the Enemy of our souls.

If we were to read the letter in a continuous circle, we would begin again at Chapter 1, where we would again hear Paul's confidence that, in Christ, we have been given all that is necessary for this fight.

Questions

As you read through Ephesians, where do you see reflections of our church vision and values, as we answer the following questions:

Why do we exist? We exist for the heavenly transformation of the culture and people of Bristol

What do we do? We help people find Jesus and follow him wholeheartedly

How do we live? We prioritise – Encounter, Family & Generosity, believing they lead to Transformation

Application

What does Ephesians teach us about

- Encountering God in the person of Jesus – Truth is not a concept to be understood so much as a Person to be known: how can you help one another to know Jesus better?
- Finding Family – how can we all play our part in creating an increasingly authentic church family, where people can discover their identity and purpose in Christ?
- How can we all play our part in welcoming those who are joining us week by week?

Week Two – 21 to 27 April Confident of purpose

Ephesians 1:1-14

Throughout these notes, I have provided each week's passage in my own translation. I suggest you use your usual bible to study the passage – my notes are based on the NIV (UK) – and then my retelling in the same way that you might use The Message, to approach it with fresh eyes.

Why should I read Ephesians?

What is the most exciting thing you can do in your life? Getting to the top of your particular profession, or securing the house of your dreams? Bungee-jumping, or white-water rafting? Finding that special someone to share the rest of your life?

No. The most exciting thing you can do is to find out why you were born. 'Why am I here?' is a profound human question. Many people today have been persuaded that they are little more than an accident, a brief spark without meaning or purpose in a cold and uncaring world.

Paul challenges that view, telling his converts that they were in fact chosen before time began by the God who created the cosmos, because he loves them and has wonderful plans for them. The same is true of everyone: we were made to find our true identity in Jesus and to live with him forever.

Sounds exciting? Read on...

Ephesians 1

¹ From Paul, chosen and sent by Jesus, the King promised and appointed by God, to my dear friends in Ephesus who've been made holy in him: ² may you all have the deep peace of knowing God's unconditional and undeserved love.

³ We all know how wonderful it is to be chosen and how special it makes us feel. How much more wonderful to be chosen by God himself! That glorious truth lies at the heart of all the extraordinary things he has done for us in and through Jesus and explains why he showers us with every spiritual gift we could possibly need.

⁴ In fact, long before he designed the cosmos and fashioned planets and stars, long before he let his imagination run wild with the colours, shapes, seasons and creatures of earth, long before all this, God chose you! He designed you to be perfect, to stand before him without feeling ashamed – and now, because of Jesus, you can begin to live the life he always intended.

⁵ God's love knows no limits and even though the cost was out of this world, he was determined to adopt us into his family. ⁶ We've only his extravagant and undeserved love to thank for all this. ⁷ He sent his only Son, Jesus, to buy us back with his own blood, which washed away our sins like stains from a cloth. ⁸ What an amazing God, to lavish unconditional love on those who have done nothing to deserve it.

⁹⁻¹⁰ And as if that wasn't enough, our individual salvation is just one part of his great plan to renew the entire cosmos and make it perfect, with Jesus himself as its King.

¹¹ We can never thank God enough for his extraordinary generosity in choosing us and sending Jesus to rescue us. ¹² All we can do is praise him for his goodness. ¹³ He included you in all this as soon as you responded to the good news of his love and trusted Jesus to provide an escape from all that ruins this life. As you did this, God himself came to live within you through his Holy Spirit. ¹⁴ His presence in your life is both a sign that you belong to him and your guarantee of a place in the new world he will create one day.

extract from Who? A fresh retelling of the New Testament © Paul Langham / The Bible Society

You are God's choice!

14 'choice' verbs or phrases in 12 verses

- chosen (vv. 4, 11)
- predestined (vv. 5 & 11)
- redemption (which means 'bought back', vv. 7, 14)
- adopted (v. 5)
- included (v. 13)

You were chosen before the creation of the world

You were chosen for a purpose

- to be holy and blameless in his sight (v. 4)
- to be a part of his plans for a renewed cosmos (vv. 9, 10)
- for the praise of his glory (vv. 12, 14)

You are the recipient of God's lavish generosity

- every spiritual blessing in Christ (v. 3)
- love in adoption (vv. 4, 5)
- grace ... freely given (v. 6)
- forgiveness of sins (v. 7), meaning that we can live free of all guilt and shame ...
- rich grace ... lavished on us (v. 8)
- all wisdom & understanding (v. 8)

You are marked with a seal – the Holy Spirit (vv. 13, 14)

- a reference to the market place – a merchant's seal told everyone
 1. this is mine
 2. it is paid for
 3. no one may touch it
- the Holy Spirit is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance

All this is true of you – and the person next to you ...

- we are united with our brothers and sisters in Christ by God's sovereign choice – we have no more control over our spiritual family than our biological one

Questions

First things first –

God has ‘chosen’ you: have you chosen God by trusting in the death of Jesus?
Are you marked & sealed with the Holy Spirit?

- List the ‘choice’ words in verses 3 – 14. What are the implications of being God’s choice? How does it make you feel? Can you believe it? What should change about your self-image in the light of this awesome truth?
- What does it feel like to be destined for a renewed cosmos? Did you understand before this sermon that a new created order is your final destiny? If not, what has changed in your thinking? How will you work this new understanding into your approach to life?
- Do you understand why it is unhelpful to speak about everyone being God’s children? Talk about the significance of adoption in the New Testament. Why is it more helpful to acknowledge that all people are God’s creatures?

Application

- Why did God choose you? Talk about the purposes for which you were designed. Do you understand what was said about being ‘holy and blameless’ even when you don’t feel it? The point is not how we appear in our own eyes but ‘in his sight’. Don’t allow false humility to prevent you owning what God has given you and his calling upon your life.
- Talk about the phrase ‘every spiritual blessing in Christ’ (v. 3). What do you think that means? Can you make a list of what might be involved? Does Paul really mean ‘every’?
- Talk about why the filling of the Holy Spirit is so crucial that this is the first thing Paul wanted to know when he met new believers (Acts 19:1-6).
- Talk about the implications of being brought into one family – your brothers and sisters are a gift: you belong to them as they belong to you

Pray for one another to receive more of the Holy Spirit, with the laying on of hands. Use Acts 19:1-6 as your model

Pray for one another to become more confident in the purpose for which Jesus has designed them, and released more fully into this

Week Three – 28 April to 4 May Confident of authority

Ephesians 1:15-23

Ephesians 1

¹⁵ No wonder, then, that ever since news reached me that you'd decided to trust Jesus and join his family, ¹⁶ I haven't stopped thanking God for you and your love for your fellow believers. ¹⁷ I pray that the Holy Spirit will make you wise and continually reveal more of God's character to you.

¹⁸ I long for you to grasp the full magnitude of our inheritance. ¹⁹ But don't think this is just 'pie in the sky when you die'. God's mighty power is already at work in you. ²⁰ Imagine the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead and enthroned him as king in heaven, ²¹ sovereign over everyone and everything in this world and the next. That same power is available to you, here and now. ²² God has made Jesus Lord of everything so that the church, ²³ which is now his body on earth, may establish his Kingdom everywhere.

extract from Who? A fresh retelling of the New Testament © Paul Langham / The Bible Society

On 16 February 1941, the British merchant ship, the SS *Gairsoppa*, was torpedoed by a German U-boat and sank, with £150 million of silver bullion in her hold. She still lies there, 300 miles off the Irish coast and 3 miles beneath the Atlantic. The problem isn't knowing the treasure is there – it's being able to dive deep enough to reach it and experience the thrill of holding it.

Paul invites us to dive deep into the treasures which lie waiting for us in the ocean of God's grace. He offers four ways in which we can bring this treasure to the surface – or perhaps more accurately: moving the treasure from the realm of knowledge (the mind) to that of experience (the heart).

1 vv. 15, 16 pray prayers of gratitude

One of the best ways to make doctrine – what we believe with our minds – come alive is to repeat it back to God in worship and thanksgiving. Here at Christ Church we place a high significance on sung worship: it's not something we do to 'fill' our Gatherings, or even to prepare us for the opening of the Word of God – although we preachers find it so much easier to do justice to scripture when we've been engaged in passionate, abandoned worship alongside our brothers and sisters! We do it because it helps us believe.

God taught his Old Testament people through a song book of 150 psalms, by which they daily rehearsed what they believed to be true about him.

To believe the good news, we don't only read scripture and study theology to feed our minds: we use our tongues in praise and adoration, both spoken and sung. We might reflect on the fact that God designed our bodies with our hearts nestled between our lungs.

Throughout his letters, Paul models how to offer prayers of thanksgiving – following his example, we can dive again and again into the riches of our inheritance.

2 v. 17 pray for the Holy Spirit's help

Here, Paul refers to the third person of the Trinity as *the Spirit of wisdom and revelation*. We'll only reach the depths of the riches given to us if we open the door of our hearts and lives to the Spirit who brings the very presence of Jesus to dwell within us and walk with us every step of life's way. When Jesus promised to give the Holy Spirit to his followers he simply said, *I will come to you* (John 14:18).

This is a sovereign work of God's grace which we receive by faith. When Paul wrote about this promise to the Christians in Corinth, he told us that it means *we have the mind of Christ* (1 Corinthians 2:16).

In 1989, the British Government tried in vain to find a salvage company capable of retrieving the bullion from the *SS Gairsoppa*. We have an expert on the inside, who knows everything there is to know about heavenly riches, and who can help us dive deeper into them than we can imagine.

3 v. 18 pray that the eyes of our heart be open to the hope and riches which are ours in Jesus

The deep treasures of God's grace are brought within reach by prayer, by reading scripture, by listening to good biblical teaching, by conversations with godly friends and mentors. But we can only truly acquire them if the Holy Spirit enlightens the eyes of our heart to see – and comprehend what we see.

This can sound complicated, but Paul is simply saying that, just as our physical eyes must be open to see physical treasure, so our spiritual eyes must be open in order to see spiritual riches. When we open our physical eyes, sight occurs when light enters them. Just so, when our spiritual eyes are opened, they are *enlightened*. However, while we can open our physical eyes, only God can open (or enlighten) our spiritual eyes.

In vv. 18-21, Paul tells us that if we actively study the gospel, the Holy Spirit will show us much more than we might initially see, including

- The **hope** contained in the Gospel
- The **riches** contained in the Gospel
- The **power** contained in the Gospel

He specifies that this power, when unleashed, raised Jesus's corpse from the grave, and raised him to heaven where he now reigns supreme over everything.

4 vv. 22-23 look for help which comes from being part of the body of Christ, the church

Paul reminds us that God's purpose throughout human history is to gather and create a new, holy community of people who acknowledge his Son as Lord over all – and who live so that Jesus' prayer of *on earth as in heaven* might become the reality he defined as *The Kingdom of God*.

For Paul, the ascension and exaltation of Jesus weren't ends in themselves – they were (and are) *for the church, which is his body*.

If Jesus is this devoted to the church, and if it is at the very heart of God's purpose to restore all things under Christ, we need to ask the Spirit to give us the same love for the local churches of which we are a part.

In 2012, the Florida-based salvage company Odyssey Marine Exploration finally reached the wreck of the *SS Gairsoppa*. It took the efforts and expertise of their whole team – project managers, ROV operators and engineers – and several years, but over 110 tons or 2,792 silver ingots (more than 99% of the silver documented to be on board) was recovered.

Diving alone is fraught with risk – we'll only go deep if we learn to dive with other Christians, working as a team, each playing our part to discover and surface the riches God has waiting for us. Paul wants us to be as determined to lay hold of those as earthly salvage operators are to recover silver and gold ... after all

¹³ Blessed are those who find wisdom,
those who gain understanding,
¹⁴ for she is more profitable than silver
and yields better returns than gold.
¹⁵ She is more precious than rubies;
nothing you desire can compare with her.

Proverbs 3

Questions

- What is Paul talking about when he speaks of spiritual riches?
- What value do you place on sung worship and corporate prayer?
- Do you have an *attitude of gratitude*? How did you cultivate it?
- What do you understand by Paul's phrase *the eyes of your heart*?
- How seriously do you take your calling to be part of the local church? How easy – or hard – is it to see your church family as the body of Christ?

Application

- Make a list of as many spiritual riches as you can – talk about which ones have been brought to the surface in your life ... and which remain in the depths?
- Spend some time give thanks to God for his glorious riches, given to us in and through Jesus
- Think together about the hope, riches and power of the Gospel – which is easiest to embrace ... and which hardest?
- Talk about the church – why Jesus is so passionate about it, why God has made it central to his purposes to bring heaven to earth – and what this means for your own involvement.

Pray for one another, for the ability to cultivate an attitude of gratitude

Pray for one another to be open to all the indwelling help the Holy Spirit can provide

Week Four – 5 to 11 May Confident of destiny

Ephesians 2:1-10

Ephesians 2

¹ Without God's help, you were as good as dead. ² The tidal pull of this world, driven by God's Enemy, creates a lethal undertow of selfishness and sin. ³ I'm not being 'holier than thou' here. We've all been there, seeing no further than the next craving, allowing our desires to lead us by the nose. Such behaviour is destructive, spoils our world and hurts other people. We can't expect to carry on like that as if there will never be a reckoning.

⁴ But wait! The good news trumps the bad – and it's so simple. Because he loves everyone so much, God has taken decisive action. Instead of punishing us, which is what we deserve, God has lavished mercy on us like a billionaire giving away his wealth. We could never earn all this. God gives it to us just like that!

⁵ Everything he did for Jesus, he has done for us. Jesus died and God raised him to life. We were 'dead' because of our sins, but now he has brought us back to life through the resurrection of Jesus. ⁶ God made Jesus king in the spiritual realms. We now share his throne. ⁷ We didn't deserve any of this. God did it simply because he loves us – and that's what we mean by 'grace'.

Can you begin to grasp just how amazing God's grace is? He wants everyone to receive the unconditional love of Jesus. ⁸ Never, not even for one moment, lose sight of how you've been saved. It's all God's doing, his gift, ⁹ nothing you can achieve for yourself and therefore nothing you can brag about. You simply need to trust in him. Think of a door or a gate: it can only open when both hinges work together. God's grace and your faith are the hinges which open wide the gates of heaven.

¹⁰ God sees each of us as a masterpiece that he's lovingly restoring so that we can live according to his original design, sharing the wonder of his love with others.

extract from Who? A fresh retelling of the New Testament © Paul Langham / The Bible Society

Ephesians 2 presents two images, which can be thought of in photographic terms:

- A *portrait* of individual transformation (vv. 1-10 – today's passage)
- A *landscape* of corporate transformation (vv. 11-22 – next week's passage)

The classic Christian testimony is a before and an after – with an encounter with Jesus in the middle, as a result of which our *before* is redeemed and transformed.

In a nutshell, Ephesians 2 teaches that

- as humans, we are powerless to save ourselves
- salvation is the initiative and work of God
- Jesus provides substitutionary atonement – 'brought near by the blood of Christ'
- the Holy Spirit is the agent of re-birth and the ongoing agent of our sanctification
- our future hope is of bodily resurrection and life without end in the new creation when Jesus returns

The Heart of the Gospel ... *'You were once ... but now you are'*

¹² ... you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ – Ephesians 2:12, 13

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord – Ephesians 5:8

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy – 1 Peter 2:10

In Ephesians 2, we see this before and after detailed

Before	After
1-3: individual reality	4-10: individual transformation
11-12: corporate reality	13-22: corporate transformation

2:1-3 Before – Individual Reality

- you were dead in your transgressions and sins (v. 1)
- you used to live (v. 2)
- we were by nature deserving of wrath (v. 3)

A stark claim: human life without God is self-absorbed and without hope (v. 3)

- gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature
- following its desires and thoughts
- we were by nature deserving of wrath
- the dangers of living in a false reality

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour – Colossians 1:21

One World, Two realms (vv. 2-3)

These verses emphasise the biblical worldview – we live in a world consisting of two realms

1. natural, physical, temporary
 2. supernatural, spiritual, eternal
- you followed the ways of this world
 - the ruler of the kingdom of the air
 - the spirit who is now at work ...

In one realm we use our 5 senses; in the other, we navigate by the Holy Spirit. One is visible, the other invisible, at least to our senses. But that doesn't make the heavenly realm any less real. In fact, quite the opposite:

¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal – 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

This testimony is taken from an AIM (Africa Inland Mission) prayer bulletin:

A missionary was taking a two-day journey into the bush, camping overnight. He subsequently met a man who confessed that he and friends had intended to kill and rob the missionary as he camped. However, they had taken fright at the 26 armed guards around him and had run away. Later, it transpired that a man from the missionary's home church had at that very time been moved to pray and to gather friends to join him. How large was that group? 26.

2:4-10 After – Individual Transformation

- God is rich in mercy (v. 4)
- made alive (v. 5)
- raised up (v. 6)
- seated in the heavenly realms (Greek = 'epouranios') (v. 6)
- we are God's workmanship (v. 10)

Warning – Christians have no grounds for superiority ('holier than who?')

- all of us also lived among them at one time (v. 3)
- we are saved by grace – this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God (2:8)
- not by works, so that no one can boast (2:9)

The Point?

- to do good works (v. 10). In the previous verse, Paul has said that our salvation does not come through works. He now uses the same, simple Greek word (which literally means 'to do') to call us to respond to God's work of grace in our lives. We can't earn our salvation through 'doing' but only by trusting in what Jesus has done. Only then can our doing be 'good' because it is a response to his initiative

God does not want nibblers of the possible but grabbers of the impossible - C.T. Studd

Questions

- How would you sum up ‘the heart of the gospel’ if you were asked to do so by a friend who wanted to know?
- Paul doesn’t pull his punches about the state of the human heart without the saving presence of Jesus Christ. But we all know people who are quite clear that they are not Christians, yet seem to live very upright lives. How can this be?
- If the state of our families, friends, colleagues & neighbours who don’t believe is as Paul describes, why do we so seldom seem to be concerned?
- What does it mean for us as individual believers to be seated with Jesus in the heavenly realms? How does that speak to our identity, our authority and our power?
- What does it mean for us as a church to be on the offensive against the kingdom of the Enemy?
- How secure are you in ‘his great love for us’?
- Is your experience of your own Christian life / your church, that of nibbling at the possible, or grabbing for the impossible?

Application

- For worship in your groups or on your own, spend time praising God for his great love and mercy, expressed in the phrases ‘you were once ... but now.’ Acknowledge some of the things we all were once, and list the differences the death of Jesus has made for all who trust in him.
- Talk a little about what it means to live in one world yet with two realms – the realm of the visible and the realm of the spiritual. If this is new thinking to some of you, read Job 1 & 2, and make a note about the way events in the heavenly (or invisible) realm play out in this realm. Then read Colossians 3:1–2 and make that a basis for prayer at the end of the meeting.
- Talk about the *good works* mentioned in v. 10. What does Paul mean here? Can you list ‘good works’ that you each feel God has designed you to fulfil?

Week Five – 12 to 18 May Confident of family

Ephesians 2:11-22

Ephesians 2

¹¹ Those of you who weren't born Jews ¹² need to remember just what a desperate state you were in – not so that you feel wretched, but so that you can appreciate God's amazing generosity. Before Jesus saved you, you didn't know God. You weren't his people and had no share in any of his promises. Put bluntly, without God you had no hope, no future, nothing. ¹³ But now – oh, how different things are now! You who were light years away from God have been brought home, all because the blood of Jesus was shed for you.

¹⁴ For as long as we can remember, Jews and Gentiles have been at each other's throats, divided by a wall of hatred. Jesus has put an end to this, at great cost. ¹⁵ As nails pierced his body he shattered that ancient wall with its graffiti of rules and regulations. His body was broken so that we might be mended. ¹⁶ As he died, so did the war between us. ¹⁷ He endured agony to reconcile us all, bringing the gift of peace to a world weary of fighting. ¹⁸ As his life ended, a new humanity was born and everyone who trusts in him enjoys free access to God the Father through his Holy Spirit.

¹⁹ So you aren't outsiders any more. Imagine a privileged people: you now share all those privileges. A loving family? You're members now. ²⁰ A wonderful building? You're part of it, resting secure on the solid foundation of God's messengers old and new, with Jesus himself giving shape to the whole structure. ²¹⁻²² And it's not just any old building: it's a living temple made up of all sorts of people in whom God lives by his Holy Spirit.

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Israel & the Church

Key question addressed by this passage (and indeed this is a recurring question throughout the New Testament is: What relationship do Christians have with the historic people of God, the Jews? (Note: in the New Testament, 'Israel' refers to the people, not the modern political state).

Given that this passage and others (most famously Romans 9 – 11) answer the question so clearly, it is remarkable how wrong the Christian church has so often been in its own answer to the question.

For centuries – and still today in many circles – a view now commonly known as 'Replacement Theology' (also 'Supersessionism' & 'Fulfillment Theology') has held sway. In this view, the church has completely replaced Israel, which therefore no longer features in God's plans. Among other things, this has led to the Christian church being, historically, a major perpetrator of anti-semitism. I would suggest that it is impossible to read the New Testament faithfully and hold to this position.

Why was Israel chosen?

God chose a people – and designed them to be a blessing to all nations

¹ The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. ² "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Genesis 12:1-3

Israel's design was to bring the blessing of the knowledge of God's saving love to the nations – see also Isaiah 2:3 / Micah 4:2; Isaiah 49:5-6

from my introduction to Romans in Who? A fresh retelling of the New Testament:

The arguments in this letter are complex but exhilarating, especially [Paul's] explanation of why Jesus is the fulfilment of everything the Jewish religious system promised. A word picture might help.

Jesus taught that God had sent him to make it possible for everyone to enter his Kingdom. Imagine for a moment your favourite place on the planet. Let's say that place represents the Kingdom of God.

God longs for everyone to be part of his Kingdom, so he builds a road, chooses one group of people (the Jews) and sends them off, warning them not to miss the signpost to the Kingdom when they come to it. He gives them a highway code – the Law of Moses – to keep them heading safely towards their destination, and asks them to help everyone else to get there too.

The sign-post is, of course, Jesus, telling them it's time to leave the road because it's done its job: it's led them to him, the sign into the Kingdom. Some of them spot the sign and follow Jesus, but others ignore the sign and carry on up the road.

Some who do follow Jesus into the kingdom are convinced that the only way anyone else can come in is by taking the same road they did and keeping all the rules in their old highway code.

But Jesus is making it possible for everyone to come in (Gentiles as well as Jews), regardless of how they arrive at him. And he commissions people like Paul to go and invite everyone in, including those who've never even heard of the road!

Like most of those who will read this, I didn't have the privilege of being born one of God's chosen people (the Jews) and so am profoundly grateful for what Jesus has done in enabling me to become part of that family and enter his Kingdom.

Fulfilment in Christ

Everything which defined Israel is encompassed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth

- land
- temple
- prophet
- priest
- king
- sacrifice

Ephesians 2:11-22

Last week, we saw the transformation of the individual – this week, Paul explores the transformation of the corporate reality of the church

2:11-12 Before – corporate reality

Before: human life estranged from God, described in 4 ways: you were

- separate from Christ
- excluded from citizenship in Israel
- foreigners to the covenants of the promise
- without hope and without God in the world (2:12)

2:13-22 After – corporate transformation

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ (2:13)

Paul uses the ancient division between Jew & Gentile to make his point (vv. 14-17)

Jesus has come to bring peace and to unite all who trust in him, in effect re-creating humanity – we see here Paul’s grasp of just how much greater is the work of the cross than simple individual salvation. The work of Christ on the Cross (vv. 14-18):

- brings peace between Jew & Gentile
- unites them – ‘made the two one’ (14); ‘to create in himself one new humanity’ (15)
- destroys the barrier between Jew & Gentile
- reconciles Jew & Gentile, ending their hostility
- the key mechanism of salvation is ‘substitutionary atonement’ – Jesus took our place (literally substituted himself) on the cross and made a sacrifice capable of paying the price of our redemption

Note – there is not the least hint of two different ways to salvation in any of Paul’s writings. In 2:18 we see that Christ preached to both Gentile (‘you who were far away’) and Jew (‘those who were near’); and that [only] through his Spirit do we have access to the Father

Whereas in 2:11-12 the condition of the human soul before conversion is defined by Paul in terms of its exclusion from Israel; Paul now defines salvation in terms of our inclusion in Israel

- no longer foreigners and aliens
- fellow-citizens with God’s people
- members of God’s household

Paul’s analogy now moves from being part of a people to being part of a building

- Christ Jesus as the chief cornerstone
- All those who trust in him and take their shape from him are being made into a holy temple

⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 2:5

What happens in a temple? It’s a place of sacrifice, prayer and worship. But supremely, for the Jews, it was the place where God dwelt by his Spirit – Paul takes this and applies it to those who place their faith in Christ

¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. ¹⁹ Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies. 1 Corinthians 16:18-20

This is the significance of the church, both individually but here in Paul's thought specifically as a body – and not just any body but the body of Christ ... we are to 'host the presence of God' just as did the temple of Isaiah's day

- this is the root of all Christian morality and sexual ethics
- this is the reason we are to love one another
- this is the reason we are not to allow anger or other destructive things to take root within us
- this is the reason we are to guard our tongues
- this is the reason why our words and deeds are to be Christlike

²⁹ How would you feel if you had to share your house with tenants who were selfish and foul-mouthed, using words as weapons to tear people apart? Or people who were bitter, liable to fly off the handle without warning, even turning violent? Who would want to live like that? ³⁰ So how do you think the Holy Spirit feels when he has to share our hearts with such characters? He's our most valuable tenant, our guarantee of salvation. Don't you realise how much it upsets him to have to share his home with darkness?

³¹ So keep a tight rein on your tongue. Nip bad words in the bud before they pass your lips. Censor your own speech and choose words that will most encourage others. When bitterness, raging temper, slander or spite claim squatters' rights to your heart, evict the lot of them! ³² Turn over their rooms to kindness and compassion. The bedrock of all Christian living is forgiveness. Never forget what it cost God to forgive you. Ephesians 4:29-32

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Questions

- Discuss whatever you have been taught before about the relationship between Israel and the Church. Does it tie in or sit at variance with what you have heard today?
- Read Isaiah 42:1-7 & 49:5-6. How was Israel designed and called to bring God's love to the world?
- How do you respond to Paul's argument that salvation (assuming you are a Gentile) means being included in God's people through the death of Jesus?
- What difference does (or should) it make to our understanding (and use) of our bodies, minds & speech to know that we are God's temple, the place where his Spirit dwells?
- What difference does (or should) it make to our understanding of the church to know that we are called corporately to host the presence of God? No longer is any building special; rather, it is the gathered people of God within whom he dwells.

Application

- Talk a little about what it means to live in one world yet with two realms – the realm of the visible and the realm of the spiritual. If this is new thinking to some of you, read Job 1 & 2, and make a note about the way events in the heavenly (or invisible) realm play out in this realm. Then read Colossians 3:1–2 and make that a basis for prayer at the end of the meeting.
- What does it mean for us as individual believers to be seated with Jesus in the heavenly realms? How does that speak to our identity, our authority and our power?
- What does it mean for us as a church to be on the offensive against the kingdom of the Enemy?
- How secure are you in 'his great love for us'?
- Is your experience of your own Christian life / your church, that of nibbling at the possible, or grabbing for the impossible?

Week Six – 19 to 25 May

Sunday 19 May is our Annual Church Family Meeting

Confident of inheritance

Ephesians 3:1-13

Ephesians 3

¹ I'm in prison because I chose to follow Jesus and his call to serve you. ² I received a gift from God (as you've already heard), but only so that I could share it freely with you. ³ That gift, a secret revealed to me, forms the heart of this letter. ⁴ As you read on you'll be able to join the dots and see the big picture about Jesus. ⁵ Hidden to earlier generations, the Holy Spirit has now made it known to those he's sent to proclaim the good news. ⁶ This 'open secret' is that God now invites Gentiles as well as Jews to inherit together the vast riches of Jesus Christ, to become one in him and together take hold of his promises.

⁷ God chose me to explain his rescue plan for all people. Having experienced God's grace and power myself, ⁸ even though I'm the last person to deserve the privilege of doing so, ⁹ I'm giving my life to enlighten everyone about the love of the God who made us.

¹⁰ God designed the Church to showcase God's wisdom and beauty to the whole creation and the heavenly realms ¹¹ and Jesus has made this eternal plan a reality. ¹² Trusting Jesus gives us the keys to God's kingdom – he invites us to make ourselves at home with him.

¹³ So don't lose heart on my account: I suffer for your good and for the gospel.

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3:1-9 Paul examines his calling and his role

- Note the emphasis on God's grace (vv. 2,7 & 8): this is God's initiative
- 'mystery' – in scripture, this is not something which is unknowable, but only knowable through the revelation of God ...
- ... hence Paul's next phrase 'revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets'
- v. 6 presents Paul's theology of salvation for Gentiles by their inclusion in Israel in a nutshell (compare his 'grafting in' analogy in Romans 9 – 11)
- note Paul's humility in vv. 7-8 – he sees himself as a servant, whatever power he has coming from God; the least of all God's people (presumably due to his past in persecuting the early Christians); and totally dependent on God's grace
- 'unsearchable riches of Christ' – again, this does not mean unknowable, just that their depths cannot be plumbed by human reasoning alone but only (as we saw in week three) by the enlightening of the eyes of our heart by the Holy Spirit
- preaching is to 'make plain'

The Levites read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense, so [the people] understood the reading (Nehemiah 8:8 – NASB)

10-13 God's design for the Christian and the Church

- 'through the church' – the church is the hope of the world' (Bill Hybels)
- God's wisdom to made known – to whom? 'to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms'
- 'eternal purpose' – this was always God's intent, it was always going to happen
- 'accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord' – Jesus finished it, made it all possible
- 'In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence'

God has designed the church to showcase his beautiful wisdom ...

The word *manifold* in the NIV is from a Greek word meaning 'many colours' – hence my use of the word *beauty*.

Interestingly, it has always been God's intention to reveal his character through those who follow him:

Obey [God's commands] completely, and you will display your wisdom and intelligence among the surrounding nations. When they hear all these decrees, they will exclaim, 'How wise and prudent are the people of this great nation!' For what great nation has a god as near to them as the Lord our God is near to us whenever we call on him? And what great nation has decrees and regulations as righteous and fair as this body of instructions that I am giving you today? Deuteronomy 4:6-8

We can trace this right back to Abraham – *through you all nations of the earth will be blessed* (Genesis 12:3)

Questions

- What does it mean to be a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of others? To what extent could that be said of us?
- Paul has been given the privilege of administering God's grace to others – is that a privilege we share?
- Are we as conscious as St Paul of our total dependence on God's grace?
- Are we as humble as he was?

Application

- How do we make the good news plain to everyone? Share your own tips for witnessing to friends, family, colleagues and strangers
- If the local church is the hope of the world, what are the implications for our own lives and the priorities of the church?
- Again Paul mentions the heavenly realms, specifically in connection with his assertion that God has designed the church to make his wisdom known. How can we do this?
- Do you feel able, in Christ, 'to approach God with freedom and confidence'? If not, can you identify what is stopping you?

Pray for anyone who is seeking help with this.

Week Seven – 26 May to 1 June Confident of love

Ephesians 3:14-21

Ephesians 3

¹⁴ Knowing this fuels my prayers to God the Father for you. ¹⁵ He knows and loves everyone in his adopted family and ¹⁶ has an inexhaustible supply of power, which I pray he will use to make you strong as steel ¹⁷ as the Spirit of Jesus makes your heart his home as you trust in him. I pray he makes you like mighty oaks, tall and majestic, with roots deep in his nourishing love ¹⁸ and enables you to grasp the vastness of this love: wider than the earth, longer than time itself, higher than the heavens, deeper than the oceans. ¹⁹ It's not enough simply to understand that God loves us – we need to experience this love soaking into every particle of our being and filling us with God himself.

²⁰ God can do more than we could ever imagine or think to ask of him when he unleashes his power in and through us, ²¹ so let the Church ring with his praises to the end of days!

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We reach the half way point of our exploration of Ephesians. Next week we take a break for half term, before picking up our series again on Sunday 9 June. So this week, we'll look back over what we've been learning – invited to do so by Paul's opening words in this passage:

For this reason ...

This is the third time Paul has said this ... what reason? Let's recap what we've learnt so far about the riches of God's mercy and grace which are ours in Jesus

- we've been blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing
- we've been chosen by God, adopted by his grace
- we have redemption & forgiveness
- we've been predestined & included
- we've been given Holy Spirit – a seal & deposit guaranteeing our inheritance
- we have resurrection power
- we were once ... but now
- we've been made us alive in Christ
- we are God's workmanship
- we were far away ... brought near by the blood of Christ
- we've been put at peace ... reconciled with God and one another
- we've been given access to the Father
- we're no longer foreigners and aliens but fellow citizens
- we've been made a dwelling for God's holy spirit
- we Gentiles are also heirs
- we may approach God with freedom & confidence

A couple of other thoughts on this passage:

finding identity in God (v. 15: *from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name*)

Identity is one of the key battlegrounds in today's culture wars in the West. Contrary to the popular view – that identity is essentially a matter of personal choice – scripture insists that human beings only find their true identity in relationship with Jesus.

being rooted and established in love (v. 17)

What's the difference between rooted and established? Think of the acorn and the oak tree: one is rooted but fragile; the other is established and secure.

The word for *love* is once again *agape*, the ultimate, self-sacrificing love shown by Jesus on the cross. Only in that love do we find ultimate security.

If you have it you don't need to have anything else; and if you don't have it, it doesn't matter much what else you have (J M Barrie)

together with all the Lord's holy people (v. 18)

The 'work' of grasping the extent of the love of God is not an individual pursuit. I find great comfort & encouragement in this truth: it's not just me, but involves countless others across the globe and through history; the vast majority of whom will remain completely unknown to me until that day when we stand together in glory, gazing upon the One who is about to restore all things ... what a day. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus ...

to know this love that surpasses knowledge

I love the idea of knowing what cannot be known – what does Paul mean by this? Paul is telling us that God's love is too vast to be comprehended by our minds. Writing to the Christians in Rome, he urges them *to be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. The first step in that renewal is the humble acknowledgment that my mind is not the ultimate arbiter of truth.

Questions

- *I kneel before the Father* ... what drives us to our knees in thanksgiving? How regularly?
- What does it mean for your identity to be named by the Father? Why is the bible's claim that human beings find their true identity in relationship with Jesus good news for people today?
- What would be different if I really believed that Jesus lived within me, went everywhere with me?
- Do you grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ?
- v. 20 – now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us ... why don't we ask more of God?

Application

Make a list of each member of the group's top 2 most meaningful spiritual blessings. Talk about why they mean so much to you

v. 21 – to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. Spend time together giving glory to Jesus for all the riches of his mercy and grace

Pray for each other to know the extent of God's love for them

~ Half Term Break: 2 – 8 June ~

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

What sort of city was Ephesus?

A fuller description for those who are interested ...

Ephesus was huge, the fourth largest city in the world after Antioch, Alexandria and Rome itself. An enormous population – around a quarter of a million people – jostled for space in its crowded streets and buildings. Writers of the time recall the densely packed housing and describe the constant noise, myriad smells and lack of privacy which this density of human living produced.

Despite this, Ephesus was by far Asia's most important city, its pre-eminence based on a fabulous harbour which made it a perfect trading hub (although by the time John wrote Revelation there were continual problems with it silting up, which eventually caused Ephesus's decline). But at this time all roads led to Ephesus, including that from distant Mesopotamia, finally meeting the Mediterranean there, via Colossae and Laodicea. The Roman geographer Strabo (64BC – AD 19) called Ephesus 'the Market of Asia'. For merchants and traders and travellers alike, Ephesus was the gateway to Asia and the highway to Rome. A few years later, when the persecution of the church was in full flood, and Christians were being shipped into Rome from across the Empire to be thrown to the lions and the gladiators, Ignatius called Ephesus 'the highway of the martyrs.'

It was also one of the 'free' cities, a privileged status granted for services to the Empire, which allowed its own city elders to govern its affairs, and which exempted it from having troops garrisoned in it. Even though Pergamum was the official capital of the province of Asia, custom dictated that when a new proconsul arrived to take up his duties as governor of Asia, he first disembark at Ephesus and so enter his new territories there.

The City boasted fabulous architecture, notably a seventy foot *wide* road lined with pillars which led from the centre of the city down to the harbour; a 25,000-seater theatre / stadium, which allowed it to host a famous annual games, attracting huge crowds from across the province; and the awesome Temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Also known as the Temple of Artemis, it was the largest building in the world at the time, and the first anywhere to be constructed entirely of marble. 425 feet long and 220 feet wide, it boasted 127 pillars, each sixty feet high, 36 of which were overlaid entirely with gold. The image of Artemis (or Diana) was one of the most sacred known to the ancient world, although its origins are shrouded in mystery. Hardly a beauty, Artemis was a squat figure with many breasts. Luke's account of Paul's stay in Ephesus (Acts 19) shows how precious the goddess and her temple were to the citizens. Extended under the emperor Domitian, this enormous temple was more than just the 'spiritual' life-blood of the city – it was the centre of what can only be described as a religious economic machine; Luke records that silversmiths and others made a very handsome living from the worship of Diana. Thousands of tiny models of the temple were made to satisfy the superstitious hunger of the spiritual tourists who flocked to Ephesus month in and month out. Most were made from pottery, but many were of solid silver and fetched premium prices.

The Emperor Domitian also built a temple in his own honour in the city, complete with a statue of himself depicted as Zeus, king of all the gods, four times life size – an enormous forearm (alone almost 3 metres in height) survives to this day. Other famous temples – to the godhead of the Roman emperors Claudias and Nero, to Hadrian and to Severus – reveal Ephesus as a city where pagan religion ruled supreme. All these temples needed staff, and it is recorded that priests and priestesses numbered in their thousands; many of them 'sacred' prostitutes, whose presence and practice had the effect of 'sanitising' immorality by adding a religious veneer. The practice of sacred prostitution was already old by Roman times, but under successive emperors it flourished as never before, becoming an integral part of city life across the Roman world.

Much of the supposed spirituality of Rome's syncretistic and debauched religious practice was in fact little more than crude superstition. Ephesus was famed for its 'magical' letters, amulets and

charms which were claimed to help childless women conceive, cure diseases, and to secure prosperity and success in business. Even Ephesus's sizeable Jewish community got involved in this lucrative scam – the secret and very holy name of Yahweh was considered a most potent spell. The rabbis doubtless disapproved, but easy money was there for the taking. Some ordinary Jews pretended to be high priests, in possession of the latest exotic charm or spell. And, of course, desperate to address whatever needs pressed upon them, gullible people flocked from all over the known world to buy them.

Given its enormous wealth, founded on trade and its multi-temple industries, Ephesus was home to a thriving banking system, which bolstered both its affluence and, of course, its sense of self-importance. Perhaps more surprisingly, it also offered asylum (once again under the auspices of the ubiquitous Artemis) to fugitive criminals. No doubt a noble initiative, it inevitably worsened both the level of crime and the standards of morality in the city.

Seeking to sum up this extraordinary metropolis, William Barclay hit upon a simple yet evocative description. 'Ephesus' he wrote 'was the Vanity Fair of the ancient world.'

Clearly, life in Ephesus (and the other cities of the Greco-Roman world) presents striking similarities with our own culture:

- a melting pot of cultures, races, beliefs
- materialistic, humanistic yet with veneer of spirituality / bewildering variety of philosophies, ways of life, and religions
- affluence leading to self-importance
- an appearance of stability (travel, living standards), yet beneath the veneer of affluence and sophistication people were tense and anxious about the future, feelings exacerbated by political upheaval & violent uprisings
- a 'spiritual smorgasbord' – countless Greco-Roman gods and goddesses / rival shrines and temples vied for business on almost every street corner

Above all, the overarching cult of the Roman Emperor set Christians seriously out of step with the powers of the state. The Romans didn't care who their people worshipped at home or in public, provided their first loyalty was to the state – this was tested annually on the Emperor's Day when citizens had to declare that he alone was worthy.

Christians were accused of 'atheism' (because their refusal to accept that Jesus was simply one among many equal spiritual options was deemed to be a denial of the gods), and assailed on all sides by the all-pervading atmosphere of paganism, syncretism & materialism; accompanied by temptations – sex, alcohol and money – which are still present today.