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A 6-SESSION STUDY  
FOR DIALOGUE IN  
COMMUNITY AROUND  
THE SCRIPTURES



# CULTIVATING HABITS OF THE HEART

First Principles of Disciplined Living

BY JEFF REED

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These materials are designed to integrate with BILD-International resources, which are designed to help churches train leaders.

All Scripture, unless otherwise noted, is from the New American Standard Bible.

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# CHRIST DWELLING IN OUR HEARTS 1

Now that we understand the essence of the first principles of our faith from studying the first three booklets, how can we be confident that we are moving this new knowledge from our heads to our hearts? It is obviously not enough to intellectually understand the essentials of our faith and the overall plan of God. We must allow them to penetrate deeply into our hearts and to begin transforming every aspect of our lives. We must begin to grasp the full significance of what it means to be a Christian—a disciple—and let that begin to encompass our every desire. In Ephesians 3:14-21, Paul prayed this very thing for the church at Ephesus. He prayed that the full implications of God’s magnificent calling on their lives would actually dwell in their hearts. And as a result, that they might fully comprehend all that God had for them. Let’s study this passage to gain some insight into embedding the faith in our hearts.



## Study the Scriptures

READ THE PASSAGE: EPHESIANS 3:14-21

### Think Through the Questions:

1. What exactly did Paul pray for the church at Ephesus?
2. What did he pray that they would comprehend and what did he hope would result from this full comprehension?
3. In this context, what does it mean “that Christ may dwell in your hearts”?
4. What role do you think Paul saw prayer playing in seeing believers become rooted in their faith?

## Summarize the Core Teaching of the Passage:

Write a paragraph, outline, annotate, or chart your conclusions— whatever best communicates for you. Try to summarize the essence of Paul's prayer request for the church at Ephesus. What did he really want to see happen in their lives?

Core teaching of Ephesians 3:14-21



## Consult the Scholars

The following comments are designed to help you better understand the passage and to stimulate your thinking on the implications of the teaching.

### Read and Reflect on this Brief Commentary on Ephesians 3:14-21:

It is important to understand the context of Paul's prayer for the church at Ephesus. It is actually the second of two major prayers in his letter. Both prayers are for similar things, and both are positioned in the first section of the letter. When studied in their contexts, it is clear that they are complementary and almost symmetrically placed within the section. They appear in a section of the letter where Paul is giving the Ephesians a fairly

complete description of their calling as Christians: what happened to them once they became Christians, what God generally expects from their lives, and a picture of Christ's magnificent plan for His church.

The two prayers, 1:15-23 and 3:14-21, carry a similar concern. Paul wanted them to fully grasp what had happened to them. Notice the phrases he used:

“a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him” 1:17

“that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened” 1:18

“that you . . . may be able to comprehend with all of the saints” 3:18

In the midst of his comprehensive explanation of what Christ had done and what He is doing in the world, Paul asked very specifically for them to have a real heart-level understanding. Notice *heart* is used twice: the “eyes of your heart,” and that Christ may “dwell in your hearts.” But he also attached concepts such as *knowledge*, *comprehension*, and *enlightenment*. Notice that the dwelling of Christ in their hearts was not primarily an experience, but a full grasping of the revelation—of the teaching, of the truth—in a way that pervaded their hearts and literally overwhelmed them. It was an inner transformation (“inner man,” see 3:16). This is very different from Eastern religion's concept of enlightenment, which empties one's mind of everything in order to get in touch with creation around. It is also very different from The Enlightenment—a historical era in the West that is based on scientific discovery. And it is quite different from the common Christian practice of “enlightenment” in the form of morning devotions. This is when we are enlightened from a verse that “speaks personally” to us, although the insight may be very different from what the author intended to say.

What is the content of this revelation that is to overwhelm us? Specifically, according to Ephesians chapters 1-3, Christ has a magnificent plan for all of eternity, and we are part of it. He is building His church, His temple, and He has inaugurated His kingdom. All the true riches of the universe belong to Him, and we are now part of it. Our sins are forgiven, and we are now heirs of all that is His. It is just as if we are already sitting on the throne with Him. On top of this, He has given us good works to accomplish while on this earth. He will use our lives and His churches to accomplish His purposes as He builds His church.

So what does it mean to be enlightened? And how does it happen? What is the role of prayer? What is the work of the Spirit? What is the role of the revelation itself? It is clear from this text that the enlightenment was content-based. It was revelation, not just an experience. Those who were trying to establish the believers fully in their faith prayed that they would really grasp what had happened to them; in this case, Paul was doing the praying. It also appears that the Spirit of God was at work in their hearts and minds, enabling them to fully grasp these realities. And it appears that the revelation, Paul's

prayer, and the work of the Spirit were intended to cause their hearts to be overwhelmed by the reality of all that Christ had done for them and was doing for them, that He might dwell (completely reside) in their hearts (the core of one's being and life aspirations).

You see, our relationship with Christ is not primarily a personal experience based on faithfully applying a few daily habits. It is not a daily, almost mystical, enlightenment from a verse of Scripture, which depends on our faithful 15-minute spurts of discipline. It is primarily a heart that is overwhelmed by comprehending what Christ has done and is doing, followed by the wise and disciplined conduct (habits) of our lives, which is based upon that revelation. This calls for a set of *habits of the heart* that cover every area of our lives, or “walk” as Paul calls it in his transitional verse in 4:1. We are to fully grasp Christ's revelation and build our entire lives around it. These disciplines that we build in every area of our lives are what we are calling the *habits of the heart*. (The entire letter to the Ephesians will be studied much more in-depth in Series Three, book four.)

### Read and Reflect on Key Quotes:

The following quote is taken from *Riches in Christ* by Ray Stedman, a book built around a series of sermons by Stedman on Ephesians 1-3. Stedman was one of the most influential church renewal writers and teachers in the 60's, 70's, and 80's. His most famous book, *Body Life*, is becoming a classic. This quote is a commentary on Ephesians 3:18.

“I want to stress that we are not to live in isolation—that is our problem—but to relate to one another, to ‘realize with all saints,’ and not to try to work things out all alone. . . . As we begin to relate to and to share with one another, then we begin to realize the height and depth and length and breadth.

“What does he mean? There are many who have made beautiful suggestions about the meaning of these four dimensions. Some see in them the cross, with its height and depth and length and breadth. Some see them as a description of the love of God. But I think they are a reference to some of the things Paul has already talked about in this letter. The ‘length’ is what he calls in chapter 1 ‘the hope to which you are called’—that hope which began before the foundation of the world, in eternity past, and reaches on through all of recorded time into the unsearchable, limitless reaches of eternity yet to come. That is the length and scope of God's program. We are caught up in God's vast, cosmic endeavor to bring all things together in Christ. That is the hope to which we are called.

“The ‘breadth’ is what he refers to as ‘the riches of his inheritance among the Gentiles’—the fact that Jews and Gentiles and all men alike are gathered up in the church, without difference or division—black, white, rich, poor, slave, freeman, male, female—it doesn't make any difference. All are one, sharing equally in the riches of Jesus Christ, through the cross.

“The ‘height’ indicates where we are in Christ—risen to sit together with Him in heavenly

places, far above all principalities, all powers, all authorities, in this age and in the age to come. It is the place of authority as a Christian, the place of power to be freed from everything that would drag us down, and to live above all that would twist and demolish and destroy in our lives.

“And finally, the ‘depth’ is what he has described in chapter 2 as death, the living death out of which God has called us. In that death we were victims instead of victors, following the course of this age, living unwittingly as directed by the prince of the power of the air, following the passions of the flesh, doing what we thought was right and ending up being wrong in everything we attempted. We were ‘children of wrath,’ as Paul described us—‘by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.’ Out of that living death—the depths of human depravity—God called us into the heights with Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Record any insights from the brief commentary and quotes:



## Think Through the Issues

When we first learn something, it is easy to be excited, yet to fall far short of fully comprehending the significance of what we have learned. This being the case, it follows that the new knowledge will not affect our lives at the level that it could and will lose its transforming effect. Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 was that the Ephesians would fully comprehend their faith and, as a result, that Christ and His plans and purposes would dwell in their hearts, thus overwhelming and consuming their lives. What is involved in this full comprehension?

**ISSUE:** Fully comprehending the faith



## Think Through the Issue Before Discussion:

1. Why is it important to fully comprehend our faith?
2. What might be some indications that we do not fully comprehend our faith? That the principles are not fully impacting our lives?
3. What would be some early signs that Christ is actually beginning to dwell in our hearts?
4. What sort of life—or heart—habits would seem to be part of a process of “comprehending with all the saints” the depths of our new life in Christ? What do “all the saints” have to do with the habits?

Record your initial thoughts on the issue before discussion:

**Discuss the issue in your small group.**

Record your initial thoughts on the issue after discussion:



## Apply the Principles

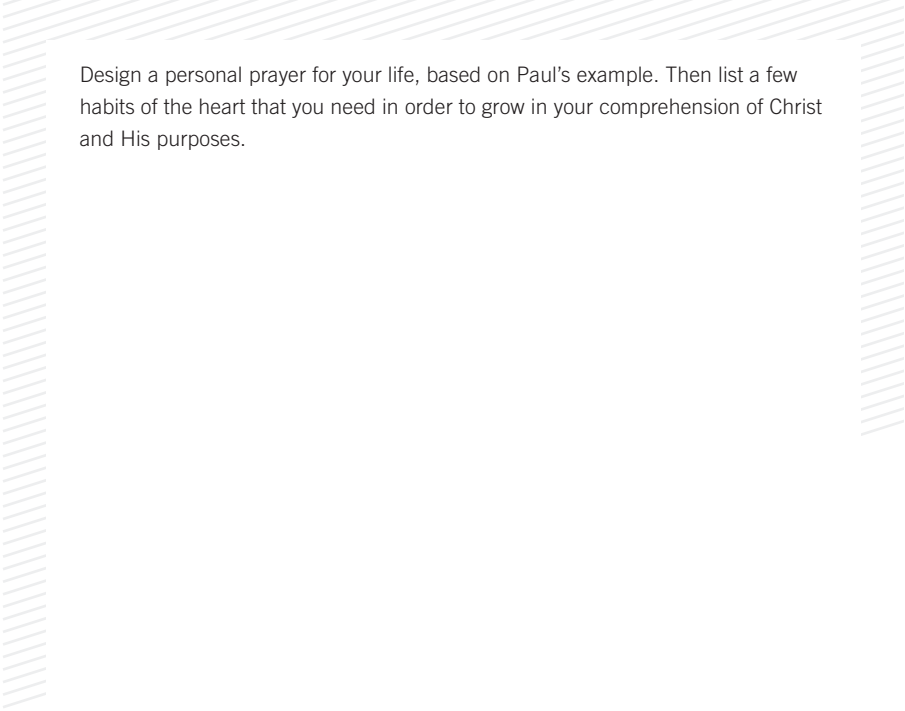
It is now time to respond to what you have studied and discussed. Take your time on this section.

### **Think Back Through the First Three Steps.**

At this stage in the series, it is crucial to reflect on how much impact the first principles are having in your life as a whole. Are you being highly impacted and beginning to comprehend the all-encompassing significance of the work of God in your life? Is it starting to take up residence in your heart?

### **Design an Application for Your Life.**

Complete the assigned project, and record any additional applications. There are two aspects to this project. The first is to design a personal prayer for your life like Paul's prayers for the Ephesians. Ask God to give you full comprehension of your calling and that Christ may begin to dwell in your heart, that is, that His plans and purposes will captivate your entire life. Then make a list of some initial life habits—*habits of the heart*—that you need to develop to fully comprehend and internalize Christ's plan for your life.



Design a personal prayer for your life, based on Paul's example. Then list a few habits of the heart that you need in order to grow in your comprehension of Christ and His purposes.