

Adopted!

By Michele Hershberger

Key Verse: “He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.” Ephesians 1:5

Faith Story: Ephesians 1:1-14

Faith Focus: Paul begins this letter with a typical Greek salutation and then launches into a wonderful blessing of God for the church at Ephesus. A mini summary of the entire letter, these 14 verses announce the central theme: being chosen or adopted but for a special mission. That mission? To help all people—even Gentiles—become part of God’s people.

Session Goal: to encourage youth to claim and rejoice over God’s adoption of them, without letting that special choosing make them feel like favorites.

Session Objectives: Each youth will

- Discuss what being adopted feels like with someone who has been adopted
- List all the blessings of chapter 1:1-14
- List persons they may intentionally or unintentionally leave out of church community
- Write up some adoption papers

Materials Needed and Advance Preparation:

Advance Preparation

Invite a person from your congregation who has been adopted to come speak to the group about what it feels like to be adopted. If you have one or more adopted youth in your group, be sensitive to this topic. Perhaps they would like to share—or perhaps this is a Bible study to skip!

Contact parents of the youth and ask them to give you baby photos for the **Focus** activity.

Materials Needed:

- Bibles
- Paper and pens for each person.

SESSION OUTLINE

Focus: (10 minutes)

Greet the youth as they gather. After everyone has arrived, lead them to the table where their baby pictures are displayed. See if they can guess who is who. (Throw in a baby picture of yourself or another church leader to make the game more challenging—and fun.)

Connect: (15 minutes)

Ask your guest to tell his or her story of adoption. Then allow time for the youth to ask questions about how it feels to be adopted. As the discussion starts to wind down, thank your guest and say: *Our scripture today from Ephesians 1 also talks about adoption: the adoption that all of us experience, for we all have been adopted by God. But the question is—what exactly does that mean?*

Explore the Bible: (20 minutes)

Ask for a volunteer to read the first fourteen verses of Ephesians chapter 1. If this person is adventuresome, ask him or her to try to read it without taking a breath. In the original Greek version, these verses were all one sentence!

Divide the group into smaller groups of two and have each pair write down as many blessings as they can find in these verses. They should have a list similar to this race to us

Peace
Blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing
Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world
Destined us for adoption
Freely bestowed his glorious grace on us
Redemption through his blood
Forgiveness of our trespasses
Lavished the richness of his grace on us
We can know the mystery, with all wisdom and insight We have an inheritance
We can live to the praise of his glory
Marked with the seal of the Spirit

Come back as a large group and compare lists. Ask: *How do you think the believers in Ephesus felt when they first read these words?*

Give a mini-lecture on the church at Ephesus. (See Insights from Scripture for help on this). Without going into detail, you may want to tell the youth that this letter might be more of a broad address to a variety of congregations and people groups instead of a letter to just one congregation. But even given that, there are some important common issues facing these early congregations. Perhaps the biggest issue was whether or not—or

how—to include Gentiles into the people of God. They would have questions similar to these questions:

- Do we as Jews allow Gentiles to become followers of Jesus?
- Do Gentiles have to become Jewish and follow Jewish Law before they can become believers?
- How can culturally unclean people (Gentiles) become Christians?
- Can we as Jewish believers accept the fact that we too have been adopted?

Go back to the adoption issue. Ask, *Why was it hard for Jewish believers to accept Gentile believers?* The youth can then discuss how Gentiles were considered unclean and godless and how difficult it would be to think that God had all along wanted them as part of his people. Direct the youth to Genesis 12:3. This is the first time God **chooses** anyone. This is the choosing of Abram. Ask the youth to find the reason for this choosing. (So that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed). Ask, *Do you think it's possible that the Israelites or Jews forgot about this original reason for being chosen and just wanted to think of themselves as favorites?*

Say, *The Jews were continually tempted to see themselves as God's favorites. But the best way to get rid of that wrong idea is to realize what you've been chosen for. Paul understood this too.* Guide the youth to chapter 1: 9-10. What has God wanted to do all along? (Gather up all things, as in all peoples) Say, *God chose both the Jews and the Gentiles—so that through them, God could get connected with all peoples!*

Apply: (9 minutes)

Explain that there can be two ways of viewing an adoption. On the one hand, some people feel like their parents love them less because they are not biologically related. Some adopted children struggle with self-esteem, questioning the complete love of their families. On the other hand, adoption can also lead one to believe he or she is more special than other children. Some families run the risk of spoiling their adopted children. The believers, a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile believers, had both dangers. Ask, *Which group probably suffered from low self-esteem? Which group probably struggled with thinking they were God's favorites?*

Now bring the discussion home. *When you think about your relationship to God and to his people, are you more like the Gentiles, feeling like you don't quite belong? Or are you more tempted to feel like the Jewish believers, who believed they were God's favorites?*

Give each youth a piece of paper. Direct them to write up "adoption" papers from God. They are to write two parts to their adoption papers. First, they are to write a paragraph from their new parent—God—where God tells them how wonderful they are and how much God loves them. In part 2, they are to again write a paragraph from God, where God explains how they are to help him adopt other people.

Respond: (5 minutes)

Gather the youth back into the big group. Ask them if they can think of a certain type of person or people group who may feel like the despised Gentiles in Paul's time. Write down the names or categories they come up with on a white board so that everyone can see. Now spend time praying that you as a group can become more welcoming to these people. Lead them in a guided prayer, using this structure:

Dear God, the one who loves us so much you did everything it took to adopt us, even death on the cross. Help us feel and accept your deep and rich love for us.
(Silence)

But God, you have also adopted us, or chosen us, for a mission. The mission of helping others find your love. Hear our silent prayers as we pray for people who need to feel your love.

Now help us be more loving and welcoming to these people: (read the list you created).

Break down our stereotypes. Break down our prejudice. Get rid of our arrogance. Give us love for you, for each other, for the world.

In Jesus'
name, Amen.

Insights from Scripture:

Our scripture today focuses on the beginning of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. There are some scholars who think that someone wrote this letter in Paul's name, which in that time was an appropriate way to honor a leader. Some scholars believe that the book is not so much a letter as a sermon or even a summary of Paul's teachings. Regardless, we can receive much from this letter, for there are common issues that many of the congregations struggled with. Some of these issues that this book addresses are:

- How do we respond to other "powers" such as magic and astrology?
- Can Gentiles be full-fledged Christians? (Our issue for this lesson)
- Why hasn't Jesus returned to earth yet?
- If we've been saved by faith already, do we have to live in a certain way? What does it mean to be holy?
- How do we keep believing in these wonderful spiritual truths—like we have resurrection power and that we are blessed with every spiritual blessing—when we live in a world full of evil?
- How do we use our spiritual power and wisdom to fight evil in a physical world?
- How do we live out the kingdom of God which is here and now (we have been chosen and have the power to fight evil now) and yet still coming (Jesus hasn't come back yet and evil won't be completely defeated until that happens)?

The central issue for the lesson today is the tension between Jewish and Gentile believers, even though the chapter doesn't address this issue directly. Some Jewish followers of Jesus believed that Gentiles could be part of God's people, as long as the men get circumcised and become "Jews." Others, like Paul, believed that accepting the radical gift of God's grace and living into that gift with their very lives (ethical living born out of gratitude) was the only important thing to do—for both Jews and Gentiles. Here in this letter, Paul uses the metaphor of adoption to illustrate this radical grace. Paul also reminds the readers (gently at this point) that all are chosen/adopted for a job. Our job, and the reason why we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing and told the "mystery" and given all this power, is to help God "gather all things to himself" verse 10. This is one way of speaking of God's overall intent to bring all people groups into the People of God.