

INTRODUCTION TO EPHESIANS STUDY – BRING UNITY TO ALL THINGS UNDER CHRIST

Key Verses: 1:9--10

“...he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment--to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.”

Author, place and date of writing

Paul identifies himself as the author of this letter (1:1). He mentions in 3:1 and 4:1 that he is a **“prisoner,”** and in 6:20 he says he is **“an ambassador in chains.”** This leads us to believe that Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison. Tychicus is mentioned in 6:21-22 as the carrier of this letter; he is also mentioned in Colossians 4:7 as the carrier of that letter; perhaps this was on the same journey. It is traditionally believed that Paul wrote Ephesians, as well as Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, during his first imprisonment in Rome, ca. A.D. 60 or 61.

Recipients

Paul addresses **“God's holy people in Ephesus¹”** in 1:1. In contrast to his other letters, in which he mentions various specific people by name, or in which he mentions Jewish believers and some of their issues, in Ephesians Paul mainly addresses **“you Gentiles”** (2:11; 3:1). In contrast to the Jews who were the **“first to put our hope in Christ”** (1:12), he says **“And you also...When you believed...”** in 1:13, referring to Gentile believers. In 2:1--2 he says, **“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live...”** referring to Gentiles. In 2:12--13 he says, **“...at that time, you were separate from Christ...you who once were far away...”** also referring to the Gentiles. In 2:19 he tells Gentile believers, **“...you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.”** In 2:22, he says, **“...you too are being built together...”** In 3:6 he mentions that Gentile believers **“are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”** In 4:17 he teaches **“...that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do.”** In 5:8 he says, **“you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.”** All these references make it clear that the Gentile Christians, not only in Ephesus, but throughout the world, were Paul's main audience here.

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Background: the city of Ephesus

In Paul's day Ephesus was the chief city of Asia Minor, a port city situated on its west coast, on the Aegean Sea¹ (see picture 1). In the first century it is believed to have been one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire, with perhaps 500,000 people. A majority of these people had emigrated there from other areas, and so the city had many ethnicities and people of various religious and social backgrounds, including both aristocrats and slaves. Ephesus was the official residence of the governor of the Roman province of Asia. There was an impressive street 35 feet wide and lined with columns that ran through the middle of the city (see picture 2). It also had a theater, library and paved streets. The city was famous for its systems of baths and its Roman aqueducts. Ephesus also was known for its entertainment. The theater was the largest of the times, outside of Rome, which could seat 24,000-25,000 (see picture 3).

The city of Ephesus was located on an ancient east-west trade route and was a major commercial center. Its emporium was world-famous; it is reported that even Cleopatra shopped there. The city contained many wealthy people. There were multi-storied residences for its upper-middle class society, with mosaic and heated floors, marble walls and running water. Its people were status-conscious and flaunted their wealth through ostentatious displays of human glory. There was a centrally located house of prostitution and gambling tables. People traveled there to watch gladiator games (1Co15:32), and there is a large graveyard for gladiators in Ephesus. People from smaller cities in Asia Minor regularly came in and out of Ephesus to do business.

Ephesus was a religious center. It was famous for its Temple to the goddess Artemis. This temple was one of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World (see picture 4). Once a year the city hosted a great religious festival dedicated to her. A eunuch priest served the goddess, helped by virgin women. Besides Artemis worship, the city became a center for the cult of emperor worship. Ephesus was also famous as a center for learning about the mystery religions prevalent in Asia Minor. People used to come from all over the Roman Empire to Ephesus to learn about these mystery religions, which included the practice of sorcery and witchcraft (cf. Ac19:19).

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Background: the church in Ephesus

At the end of his second missionary journey Paul stopped by Ephesus briefly and left his close coworkers Priscilla and Aquila there (Ac 18:19-21). Meanwhile, Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He spoke with great fervor and taught accurately about Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.² It seems that the disciples who were raised in his ministry had the same deficiency that Apollos had. When Paul arrived at the beginning of his third missionary journey, he encountered these disciples in Ephesus, about twelve men in all. Paul helped them to receive the Holy Spirit (Ac 19:1-7). In this way the church in Ephesus was born.

For the first three months Paul testified in the synagogue, but some Jews became obstinate and persecuted the Way. So Paul left them, took the disciples with him, and had discussions not in the synagogue once a week on the Sabbath, but daily in the public lecture hall of Tyrannus, and focusing not on Jews but on Gentiles. This intensive Bible study went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord (Ac 19:8-10). There was a great work of the Holy Spirit. There were extraordinary miracles through Paul, and many people, in repentance, burned their expensive sorcery scrolls. In this way the word of God spread widely and grew in power (Ac 19:11-20). The church became strong and healthy. Through God's work in Ephesus, Paul was inspired to go and work in Rome (Ac 19:21). Through Paul's Ephesian ministry, other churches in Asia Minor were begun, including Colossae, Laodicea and Hieropolis (Col 4:13,16). It is likely the other churches of Asia Minor mentioned in Revelation 2:1-3:22-Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea-were also pioneered from Ephesus (Ac19:10). During this time in Ephesus, scholars believe Paul wrote 1 & 2 Corinthians.

At the end of his third missionary journey Paul met the Ephesian elders at Miletus to say farewell to them (Ac20:17-35). From his farewell speech we learn how Paul had served the Lord in Ephesus: 1) with great humility and with tears; 2) in the midst of severe testing from Jewish opponents; 3) preaching and teaching publicly and from house to house; 4) with the message that people must turn to God and have faith in our Lord Jesus; and 5) with a good example of do or die spirit (Ac 20:24). He also encouraged the Ephesian elders to be good shepherds of God's flock, remembering that it was the Holy Spirit who had made them overseers. He warned them about savage wolves, who would distort the truth and not spare the flock. While living among them, he worked hard with his own hands to supply his

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own needs and to help the weak, teaching them the blessing of a giving life. Upon parting, the Ephesian elders expressed their deep love relationship with Paul their shepherd (Ac 20:36-38). It shows that at this early date the Ephesian church was already a stable and mature ministry.

Characteristics

Triune God in the church: In Ephesians, the word “God” is repeated many times, as is “Father,” “Christ,” “Jesus,” “Lord,” and “Spirit.” This emphasizes that the church originates not with people but with God, who has revealed himself to be the Triune God. Also, the church is governed not by people but by the Triune God. The Triune God is working powerfully in his church for his own purpose.

The heavenly realms: One of the unique expressions in Ephesians is “**the heavenly realms**” (1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12). God blesses us “**in the heavenly realms**” with every spiritual blessing in Christ (1:3). Christ is now seated at God’s right hand “**in the heavenly realms**” (1:20-21). And now we are seated with Christ “**in the heavenly realms**” (2:6). God’s intent is that through the church his manifold wisdom should be made known to the rulers and authorities “**in the heavenly realms**” (3:10). Paul also mentions that there are spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms, and thus, that our struggle should not be against flesh and blood here on earth, but against these evil spiritual forces (6:12). In light of this, even though in our time we tend to be very focused on the physical, material world, we need to realize the spiritual reality of “**the heavenly realms.**” In the heavenly realms, there are forces working both for good and for evil, both for God and against God. Through raising Christ from the dead and seating him at his right in the heavenly realms God exerted his mighty strength, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come (1:19-21). This truth should give us a sense of final victory. But this victory is not yet won. So we are repeatedly encouraged to “**put on the full armor of God**” and fight against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms that are still working against all believers (6:11,13).

Predestination: When we look at Paul’s other epistles, at the beginning he usually mentions the current issues with which the particular church is struggling. But in Ephesians Apostle Paul mentions every spiritual blessing in Christ, including predestination. Paul reveals that God chose us before the creation of the world and predestined us to be adopted to sonship (1:4-5,11). Paul directs this teaching especially to the Gentile believers. They may have felt that since God’s explicit

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plan was to bless the Jews, they had received salvation and grace as an afterthought. They may have had an inferiority complex toward the Jews. But Paul declares that before the creation of the world it was God's plan to bless the Gentiles with the gospel, too. This would give Gentile Christians confidence that their salvation is rooted in the eternal plan of God.

The mystery: Apostle Paul used the word “**mystery**” frequently in this letter (1:9; 3:3,4,6,9; 5:32; 6:19). Paul's intention was to help Ephesian believers have the assurance that their knowledge of the gospel was superior to any other knowledge in the “**mystery religions,**” which were deeply embedded in that culture. These religions seemed to give some kind of benefit through knowing their deceitful mystery (4:22). Those who had this knowledge became very proud, exclusive and divisive, but their lives were empty and bankrupt (4:17). On the other hand, the mystery revealed in Ephesians gives every spiritual blessing in Christ, which makes people truly rich (1:7, 18; 2:4,7; 3:8,16), and enables us to live life to the full (1:23; 3:19; 4:13). This mystery destroys all barriers and brings unity and real peace (2:14--18). This mystery had been kept hidden in God, who created all things, but was revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets (3:5). In the past the Gentiles never imagined to share in the spiritual blessings of Israel. But the mystery is that through the gospel they are heirs together with Israel, members of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (3:6). This mystery is reflected in the relationship of a husband and wife, who mirror the relationship of Christ and the church (5:32). This mystery was made known to Paul by revelation (3:2-3). His prayer was to fearlessly make known this mystery of the gospel to the whole world, especially to the Gentiles (6:19).

Prayers: Although it is not unusual for Paul to pray in his letters, his prayers for the Ephesians are especially striking, for he offers two extended prayers for them. In his first one, he especially prays for them to have the Spirit of wisdom and revelation to know God better (1:15-17). He prays for the eyes of their hearts to be enlightened so that they may know the hope to which he has called them, the riches of his glorious inheritance and his incomparably great power (1:18-23). In his second prayer, he asks that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith, so they may be rooted and established in love, and, together with all the Lord's people, grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ (3:14--21). The words “**together with all the Lord's people**” indicate that this is not a prayer for individuals, but a prayer for the community of believers. In Paul's prayer we learn God's vision for the church. We cannot fulfill this vision with our own effort, but God through his power can accomplish it. Paul's prayers for the Ephesians are

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especially helpful in showing us what to pray for individuals and the church in our time.

Praise: From the beginning of this letter, Paul praises God who blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (1:3). Paul also praises God for the glorious grace he has freely given us in the One he loves (1:6). Paul explains that God’s purpose in choosing, predestining and redeeming his children is that they may praise his glory (1:11-14). Because of what God has done for us, we should always praise him. Paul encourages us to speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit and to sing and to make music from our hearts to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen! (5:19-20)

Riches and fullness: The words “riches” and “fullness” are used repeatedly by Paul in Ephesians. In 1:7-8a Paul writes that God redeemed us through Jesus’ blood in accordance with **“the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us.”** In 1:18, Paul prays for the Ephesians to have their hearts enlightened with the hope to which God has called us, **“the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people...”** In 1:23 Paul described the church, which is the body of Christ, **“the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”** In 2:4 Paul tells us that God made us alive with Christ out of his great love for us, and that God himself is **“rich in mercy.”** In 2:7 Paul foretells that in the coming ages God might show the incomparable **“riches of his grace,”** expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. In 3:8 Paul recognizes God’s great grace that was given him to preach to the Gentiles **“the boundless riches of Christ.”** In 3:16 Paul prays that the Lord may strengthen the Ephesians with power through his Spirit **“out of his glorious riches.”** He also prayed for them in 3:19 to be **“filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”** In 4:10 Paul teaches that Christ who descended to this world also ascended higher than all the heavens, **“in order to fill the whole universe.”** In 4:11-13 Paul explains that Christ gave his servants to equip his people so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, **“attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”** In 5:18, Paul admonishes believers not to be drunk on wine, but to be **“filled with the Spirit.”** Here we learn that God is not poor, but very rich and he lavishes his glorious riches on undeserving sinners. He wants us to be filled with his fullness.

Gentile lifestyle and God’s grace: In writing to the Gentiles in Ephesus, Paul describes the typical Gentile lifestyle in detail. He says they were **“dead in**

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transgressions and sins,” that they **“followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient”** (2:1-2). They were futile in their thinking, darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God (4:17-18). They were insensitive, sensual, and indulgent (4:19). They were corrupted and deceitful (4:22), slaves of anger (4:26-27), lazy and stealing from others (4:28). They were bitter, violent and malicious (4:31). They were especially greedy, sexually immoral and impure (4:19; 5:3,5). They also engaged in obscenity, foolish talk and coarse joking (5:4). In a word, they were **“darkness”** (5:8), **“without hope and without God in the world”** (2:12).

God had mercy on them. Paul emphasized that it was only by God's grace that they had been saved (2:5). It was the gift of God, not by works, but by faith (2:8). This grace came to them through Paul's gospel preaching (3:2,7). Paul considered it amazing grace that he was called to preach the gospel (3:8). The ultimate source of this grace was Christ, who humbled himself to come into this world (4:7).

We learn in Ephesians that remembering our former way of life helps us appreciate God's grace and not boast. We also learn that after believing in Jesus, our lifestyle has to change. We, too, need to accept Apostle Paul's exhortation to put off our old self and put on our new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (4:22--24).

Reconciliation, removing all the barriers and making peace: There was a great barrier between Jews and Gentiles mainly in regards to the law, with its commands and regulations. It made the Jews proud, the Gentiles inferior, and created hostility between them. This barrier could not be removed by human effort. But Christ himself is our peace. He destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two. Through Christ both Jews and Gentiles have access to the Father by one Spirit (2:14-18).

In our churches today we too experience various kinds of barriers and hostility between believers that undermine the health of our communities. Instead of trying to resolve these matters by ourselves, we need to learn to come to Jesus himself, who is our peace and who can help us to truly reconcile and have spiritual unity.

Marriage: Christ and the church: Paul's instructions to married couples in Ephesians are the most comprehensive in the Bible (5:21-33). In this section he

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compares the relationship between husbands and wives to the relationship between Christ and his church. He begins with wives, as he does in Colossians, instructing wives to submit themselves to their husbands as to the Lord. Then Paul gives an extended exhortation to husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church. He also adds that the unity between husbands and wives is a profound mystery, reflecting the unity between Christ and the church. He summarizes that husbands must love their wives as they love themselves, and that wives must respect their husbands. These admonitions to “love and respect” are simple, yet profound and timeless. They apply to couples in any generation who seek to have a godly marriage based on Biblical principles.

Major Theme

In Ephesians, the word “church” appears nine times, and it always refers to the church universal, not the local church (1:22; 3:10,21; 5:23,24,25,27,29,32). The church universal includes all people of all times in all places who genuinely confess Jesus as their Lord and Savior. In 1:22 Paul says, **“And God placed all things under his [Christ's] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church...”** In 3:10 he says, **“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms...”** And 3:21 says, **“...to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”** In chapter 5 the word “church” appears six times in relationship to Christ: **“Christ is the head of the church”** (23), **“the church submits to Christ,”** (24), **“Christ loved the church,”** (25) **“to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless,”** (27) **“...they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church, for we are members of his body”** (29-30), **“I am talking about Christ and the church”** (32).

Through the verses which refer to the church, we learn that Christ is the head of the church and all believers are members of his body. The head governs the body, overseeing its functions, for the health of the whole person. The head and the body have a life sustaining relationship. Without the head, the body cannot but run around aimlessly without any direction, and finally dies. God’s intent through the church is to reveal his manifold wisdom according to his eternal purpose (3:10-11) by making Gentiles heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (3:6). In Paul’s time, it seemed impossible for the Gentiles to be accepted into fellowship with the Jews as equals.

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But God's manifold wisdom was to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ through the church (1:10). God destroyed the barrier between Jew and Gentile through Christ, making the two groups one (2:14). His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross (2:15-16). God wants all people, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, social background, education level, economic status, and so on to be united in Christ through the church. We need to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace because there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (4:3-6).

In order to realize God's vision for unity, believers need to grow to maturity. We must all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (4:13). Then, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (4:15-16). Here we must realize that maturity refers not only to individual believers, but mainly to the body of Christ as a whole. Christ supplies everything the body needs, but the body must build itself up in love until the members are well connected and able to function together according to God's will.

Paul's Purpose of Writing

In writing this letter to the Ephesians, Paul wanted to help the Gentiles have a clear identity in Christ as members of his body, and to see God's glorious purpose for them and how to live as members of the new humanity in Christ.

The Purpose of Our Study

Through the study of Ephesians, we pray to discover God's universal plan to bring unity to all believers and to all things under Christ through the church. We want to learn a right view of the church, which is Christ-centered, so that we can be one in Christ regardless of any human distinctive, and to grow to maturity. Finally, we want to learn how to be victorious in the spiritual battle.

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Outline

Paul's greetings (1:1-2)

Every spiritual blessing in Christ (1:3-14)

Paul's first prayer for the Ephesians (1:15-23)

Made alive in Christ (2:1-10)

God made one new humanity through the cross of Christ (2:11-22)

The mystery of the gospel was revealed (3:1-13)

Gentiles and Jews share God's blessings together (3:1--6)

Gentiles and Jews may approach God with freedom and confidence (3:7-13)

Paul's second prayer for the Ephesians (3:14-21)

Live a life worthy of our calling (4:1-6:9)

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit (4:1-16)

Christian unity (4:1-6)

Christ gives gifts to build up his body to maturity (4:7-16)

Put on the new self (4:17-32)

Don't live the way the Gentiles live (4:17-19)

The way of life we learned in Christ (4:20-32)

Walk in the way of love (5:1-20)

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (5:21-6:9)

Wives and husbands (5:22-33)

Children and parents (6:1-4)

Slaves and masters (6:5-9)

Put on the full armor of God (6:10-20)

Final blessings (6:21-24)

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<http://www.ephesus.us/images/4.jpg>

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