

EPHESIANS

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

&

COMMENTARY



By Walter Cates 4/21/22 ver1.0

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In the first century, Ephesus was the largest city in the Roman province of Asia Minor. Although not the provincial capital, it was a seaport city located on a river, allowing easy trade 300 kilometers into the interior. It was a pagan worship center. The temple to Artemis (or Roman Diana) was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The Romans minted coins with the inscription, Diana of Ephesus.

Aquila and Priscilla were tent makers who were originally from Rome. When Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome they relocated to Corinth. There they met, worked with, and were taught by Paul who was nearing the end of his second mission trip. The three of them most likely spent a year together. When Paul left Corinth to go to Jerusalem Aquila and Priscilla accompanied him as far as Ephesus. Aquila and Priscilla made their home in Ephesus and most likely established the first Christian fellowship there. Paul spoke briefly at the synagogue, promised to return and continued on to Antioch-Syria.

A fellowship of believers in Ephesus was most likely established by Priscilla and Aquila around 50 AD (Acts 18:18) following Paul's departure from Ephesus. Some-time later, Apollos visited Ephesus and spoke boldly and convincingly about Christ. But he lacked knowledge of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Priscilla and Aquila "invited him to their home and explained the way of God more adequately" (Acts 18:24-26).

Paul returns to Ephesus:

Paul returned to Ephesus on his third missionary journey. It is unclear how established the Christian fellowship in Ephesus was at that time. Paul taught in great detail, performed many miracles and "the name of the Lord Jesus becomes much revered among Jews

and Greeks”. The fellowship began to grow. It is thought that Paul stayed in Ephesus for 2 years (Acts 19:1-20).

Was Paul the author of the letter to the EPHESIANS?

The world is and always has been the reluctant host to *conspiracy theorists*. There are those who say Paul did not write Ephesians. They state the letter is too kind and too loving and does not fit Paul’s “style” of writing. Most of these writers are on a mission to attract attention and followers.

I have chosen a different route. I have elected to delineate Paul’s Christian life into four periods. •First, we have Paul the Gospel spreader and church builder. This is the period from 34 to 57AD. During this time frame Paul wrote; Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians and Romans. •Second there is the time, 57 to 62AD, Paul spent in prison, first in Caesarea then Rome. •Third is a short time of freedom, 63 to 65AD, in which Paul visits Crete again. It was during this time Paul wrote first Timothy and Titus. •Fourth and finally is the second arrest and imprisonment. During that time Paul wrote his final letter, 2 Timothy.

You may ask “Why does any of this matter?” It helps us find some understanding of Paul’s frame of mind as he wrote these letters. Just as the great painters and composers of all times have reflected their ever changing mood and character in their art brought about by significant life occurrences, so too does Paul.

In the missionary, church building time of his life, he is on a mission. Paul is dedicated to the mission that Jesus our Lord personally gave to him. During this time frame Paul wrote 6 letters and each of these letters strongly reflect Paul’s attitude and dedication to his given task. Then Paul is imprisoned. Paul knows this may end his task of spreading the gospel. His hope is that it won’t. It is in this frame of mind that Paul writes Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians.

Paul then has about 2 years of freedom during which time he returns to Crete. While there he writes 1 Timothy and Titus. Finally, Paul is recalled to Rome. While imprisoned in Rome for a second time Paul writes his final letter, 2 Timothy. Then Paul is martyred.

THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

All of Paul's previous letters have been written to address specific problems within specific fellowships. It is true Paul could be very stern and commanding in reprimand. But all his letters also showed his kind and loving concern for the followers of Christ. Paul writes the Ephesians letter from a totally different frame of mind and for a different reason. Paul is in prison and receives news of the devotion of the fellowship of the Ephesians. Perhaps Paul said to himself, "I have not run my race in vain, praise God". I believe Paul has reached a second turning point in his life.

CHAPTER 1.

Like all of Paul's letters he starts with a from, a, who to and a salutation. This is followed by a rather lengthy blessing which states our relationship with God. We must read this section very carefully (1:3-14). Paul clearly describes our relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Here we run into the word **PREDESTINED**. Paul clearly states the eternal predestined relationship is reserved for all and only, the **BELIEVERS**.

Within this blessing is a definition that is quite often missed by readers. He defines "US". Recognition of who US refers to is key to full understanding of the words of God, Paul has passed on to **us** in this chapter. **Us** refers to those who have heard and believed the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection. At the beginning of time God predestined **us** to a special position and place in eternity. He did not predestine everyone or even Joe, Pete, Mary or Sally, he predestined **us**. **Us**, is a unique group.

In verse 11 of chapter 1 Paul gives us and defines two more special groups. **We** is defined. This group is the first apostles and

disciples that witnessed the life and presence of Christ. Then he defines YOU as those who have not witnessed, yet believed.

(US = WE + YOU Try to keep this in mind as you read Ephesians.)

In verses 15 through 23 Paul reflects, in a prayer, what has inspired the writing of the letter. This prayer reflects Paul's gratitude for the ongoing dedication to the Gospel by the Ephesian fellowship. Paul, I believe is aware that his journey is nearing its end. Fellowships like the Ephesians reassure him that he did not run his race in vain. He also reminds them in this prayer of three important truths.

- 1, They have been called.
- 2, There is an inheritance.
- 3, The Father's power is unlimited.

CHAPTER 2.

Chapter 2 starts out with a description of life as a puppet of satan. Note: the word spirit is lower case. Paul uses the Greek work sarkos (or sarx in some translations) which we translate as flesh. Sarkos means a state of mind or behavior in opposition to the Holy Spirit. Those who choose the flesh chose pleasure and comfort now with no hope for eternity. The people of Ephesus knew about the one true God. They knew about the devil and they knew about all the false gods and idols. They chose to reject God. But those who heard the Gospel and believed are blessed by His Grace, and given a task. We do not decide what good works we will do. God decides, we must discover. (vs 4-9)

The days of spiritual separation of the circumcised and the uncircumcised are dead and gone forever. The days of, salvation through the law are dead. Grace now supersedes all covenants and is the gift to all mankind for salvation into the everlasting presence of God through Christ. Jew and Gentile are no longer separated by custom and law. Grace has removed the barriers. All mankind are now eligible for adoption and salvation. Now in Christ, under GRACE there is no adherence to Mosaic law required. Christ's suffering paid all our sin debts.

Paul is stressing again that under grace there is no need for the rituals of the law. No longer are there separations between Jew and Gentile. All barriers have been shattered like the curtain in the temple. (vs 11-22)

Note: In verse 15 we have a word translated as “flesh”. The Greek word *sarki* is used. This word refers to the mortal body of a person. In this case referring to the body of Christ.

No one has exclusive or privileged access to God. The Spirit of God is housed in the structure of the fellowship. The structure is anchored in Christ as the corner stone with the foundation in the prophets and apostles and framework of the fellowship.

CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3 starts out with an indication that the letter was written while he was a prisoner in Rome. Then goes on to explain the basis of his teachings and preaching. By revelation, remember he spent three years in the wilderness in a time of contemplation and revelation. He spent three years communing with Christ Jesus. This time was before he ever preached the word of Christ.

We should not get Paul’s use of the word mystery confused with a movement of mysticism or Gnosticism. The mysteries Paul writes about are simply the knowledge of God that was unknown to us prior to revelation through the prophets of which Paul was one. In verse 6 he once again stresses that the revelation is for all mankind not just the Jew.

As a former persecutor of the fellowship of Christ, Paul considers himself of low position or esteem. In spite of his prior violation of the fellowship of Christ, the grace of God fell upon him. From the less than the least, comes the greatest of all revelations. The plan of God for all mankind is revealed. It is through the Church that the wisdom of God will be made known.

Note: As you read any of Paul's writings try to mentally replace the word **church** with **fellowship**. In our modern culture the word church most often conjures up mental pictures of a majestic building. In Paul's day synagogues and temples were buildings of worship. The church was the membership. A fellowship of Christians in our modern culture more fittingly fits Paul's definition of a church.

Paul closes Chapter 3 with another prayer for the Ephesians. In this prayer he again stresses that we, the fellowship share a kindred connection to all the heavens and earth. All believers, Jews, Gentiles, Romans and Greeks share in the blessings of the father. Before reading 3:20-21 Close your eyes and imagine a massive crowd of people . No backdrop, no building, just a mass of believers. With that image fixed firmly in your mind read:

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, ²¹ to him be glory in the fellowship and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

CHAPTER 4

Chapter 4 starts out with a reminder that Paul is a prisoner for the faith and proceeds into a plea for unity and peace within the fellowship. All should be in unity, one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith and one baptism.

Here again Paul speaks of one Baptism. He is referring to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He makes it clear in 1st Corinthians that salvation comes from the baptism of the Holy Spirit and not the baptism of water, John's baptism. The baptism of the Spirit is God reacting to our belief and acceptance of the work of Jesus. Baptism of water is our response in recognition of our salvation through Christ Jesus.

Verses 9 and 10 seem to be a parenthetical insertion reminding us that Christ came to earth and returned to the father. The chapter goes on to tell us, Jesus did not abandon us with his ascension. He gave us a network of apostles, teachers, prophets, evangelists and pastors. He ascended into heaven, yes, but he did not abandon us.

We have a network of support to guide, teach ,console and equip us to serve God’s purpose as he determined at the creation of all things tangible.

We are charged to grow in our faith until his return. We are all special envoys of the Kingdom of God. We must recognize that when Christ ascended to his proper position with the father, He left behind special ambassadors. These ambassadors should be respected and followed.

These ambassadors will aid us in leaving our old futile lives behind, as explained in 4:17 to 32.

Note: 4:17 in the NIV uses the word “gentiles” which can be confusing to some. This is an error in translation. The original Greek text contains the word “ethnE” which refers to nations or races. Paul used that term to refer to the non-believing masses and how they lived.

From verse 20 to the end of the chapter Paul gives an abridged definition of how a Christian believer should live.

CHAPTER 5 through 6:9

Follow the example of our lord, Christ Jesus and your life will be a sweet fragrance to our Father God.

In verses 3 – 7 Paul uses the term “you” with special inference. The “*you*” here is the believing fellowship. Guidance is given on keeping “*you*” acceptable in the presence of God. There are ramifications for not living by these standards. “*You*” are not to be “joint partners” (actual Greek to English translation) with the nations (or unbelievers).

“*You*” have made the transition from living in the dark to living in the light of the Lord, why would *you* want to go back. Stay in the light and continue to find what pleases the Lord

NOTE: Paul inserts a quote that is thought to be a line from a hymn of the time (vs14)

Many people in our time have difficulty with 5:21 through 6:9,

Here Paul is addressing his culture in his time. I believe what we should take from this is: Regardless of what cultural age we are in there are norms and taboos. In Paul’s culture there were norms, i.e., the social position of men and women. We must function within our culture if we are to continue to spread the Gospel. So, when culture does not conflict with the Grace given by God, we are compelled to live within it.

CHAPTER 6:10 – 24

All adult Christians have listened to enough sermons on the armor of God to be well versed in its meanings. However, there is one often missed principle that is seldom mentioned

Let’s review the Armor of God

Paul quite often used metaphors to explain the concepts and ideas God put in his heart.

*The use of a metaphor works only if the audience recognizes the analogy and can relate it to the speaker’s objective. The first century secular stresses, fears and norms were quite different from ours in the 21st century. To truly understand the metaphors and parables of the first century we must try to understand how the first century people related to life around them. Paul used many subjects for his metaphors like farmers, athletes, war and soldiers. Each one was specifically targeted to zero in on a specific audience. Hearing the words, **ARMOR OF GOD**, the Ephesians would have immediately pictured, in their minds, a Roman soldier. To them, like him or not, a Roman soldier was the essence of strength, skill and*

power. He was the personification of the Cesar and the Roman Empire.

What did the Ephesian know about a Roman soldier?

They knew he was just a man, but a man with special skills and training. They knew that before he was allowed to wear the armor of an Imperial soldier, he had to complete rigorous training in the arts of war and combat. He had to be good at what he did because when he put on his armor, he would project all the power and authority of the Emperor of the Roman Empire.

Where ever he went he carried that image of authority. Take him out of his uniform of armor and he was just a man not unlike any carpenter, baker or shepherd. However, in his armor he was the might of the Roman Empire.

*With these ideas clearly in the minds of the Ephesians Paul built on these concepts. He related each part of the uniform of armor to a specific attribute of the Christian Soldier. So how do we, of the twenty-first century, relate to the metaphor? It is relatively simple as Paul explains each part of the armor to understand what he is saying. Yes, God provides us with the armor to battle evil in the world. However, I believe that most Christians miss an important meaning of wearing the ARMOR OF GOD. **When we wear the armor of God, we must reflect the power and majesty of our Sovereign in heaven.** When you put on the armor of God and go among the people... do they say “look there goes the majesty, authority and power of God?”*

Are you training rigorously?

Are you reflecting God’s majesty in your life?

OK, now, perhaps with a new insight, GO, read Ephesians 6:10-20.

Once you are fully protected by the Armor of God you are ready to deploy the most powerful weapon in the battle against the evil one, and that is prayer. So, Paul closes the letter to the Ephesians with a plea for prayer. Then he announces the future arrival in Ephesus of Tychicus who will bring more details. Then a final benediction of blessings, love, peace and prayer request.

AMEN

